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## **Youth Vulnerability and Exclusion (YOVEX) in West Africa: Synthesis Report**

**Prepared by Wale Ismail, 'Funmi Olonisakin,  
Bob Picciotto and Dave Wybrow**

## About this report

This report presents the findings of a study on youth vulnerability and exclusion (YOVEX) conducted in West Africa. The aim of this study, which was sponsored by the UK Department for International Development (DFID), was two-fold: first, to stimulate debate on the security and development challenges posed by the demographic transition currently under way in West Africa; and, second, to generate policy recommendations geared to the reduction of youth vulnerability and exclusion. The research was undertaken in seven countries that are either recovering from armed conflicts or which have not experienced intra-state warfare, but display state fragility characteristics (Ghana, Guinea, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria and Sierra Leone). The case studies confirm the critical importance of local context for understanding the situation of youth, but also point towards common lessons relevant to the future design of youth programmes in West Africa.

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The **Conflict, Security and Development Group** is a leading international resource for research, analysis, training and expert policy advice on issues at the intersection of security and development. CSDG was established at King's College London in 1999 with the aim of bridging the academic and policy communities. Its core mandate is to deepen understanding about the development challenges confronting societies in Africa, Asia and Latin America, and to help translate this knowledge into practical agendas for change at local, national, regional and international levels.

CSDG's **Africa Peace and Security** programme seeks to enhance understanding of the dynamics of conflict and insecurity on the continent and to support local, national and regional responses to its development and security challenges.

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# CSDG Papers

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## **Youth Vulnerability and Exclusion (YOVEX) in West Africa: Synthesis Report**

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A study sponsored by the UK Department for International Development (DFID)

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# Contents

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| <b>List of boxes and tables .....</b>   | <b>5</b>  |
| <b>Acknowledgements .....</b>   | <b>6</b>  |
| <b>Abbreviations and acronyms .....</b>   | <b>8</b>  |
| <b>Executive summary .....</b>  | <b>9</b>  |
| <b>Chapter 1: The YOVEX Study .....</b>   | <b>15</b> |
| 1.1 Introduction .....  | 15        |
| 1.2 Pilot phase .....   | 16        |
| 1.3 Second phase .....  | 17        |
| 1.4 Project concept .....   | 18        |
| 1.5 The nature of youth exclusion and vulnerability .....                                 | 19        |
| 1.6 Methodology .....   | 20        |
| 1.7 Organization of the report .....  | 21        |
| <b>Chapter 2: Young people and youth-hood .....</b>                                       | <b>22</b> |
| 2.1 Introduction .....  | 22        |
| 2.2 Youth as an age group .....   | 23        |
| 2.3 National policy definitions of youth .....  | 24        |
| 2.4 Young people's views of youth-hood .....  | 26        |
| 2.4.1 <i>Gender</i> .....   | 27        |
| 2.4.2 <i>Rural versus urban youth-hood</i> .....  | 28        |
| 2.4.3 <i>Traditional versus conceptions of modern youth-hood</i> .....                    | 28        |
| 2.4.4 <i>Older versus younger youth</i> .....   | 29        |
| 2.5 Conclusions and recommendations .....   | 29        |
| <b>Chapter 3: How does context matter? .....</b>  | <b>31</b> |
| 3.1 Introduction .....  | 31        |
| 3.2 Issues in youth vulnerability .....   | 31        |
| 3.2.1 <i>The youth bulge</i> .....  | 32        |
| 3.2.2 <i>Levels of natural resource endowments and overall economic development</i> ..... | 33        |
| 3.2.3 <i>Poor governance and policy framework</i> .....                                   | 33        |

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| 3.2.4 <i>Civil wars, armed conflicts and political instability</i> .....                                  | 34        |
| 3.2.5 <i>Urbanization and rural–urban migration</i> .....   | 35        |
| 3.3 <i>Issues in youth exclusion</i> .....  | 36        |
| 3.3.1 <i>The nature of politics and electoral systems</i> .....   | 36        |
| 3.3.2 <i>Structural limitations</i> .....   | 37        |
| <b>Chapter 4: What are governments doing?</b> .....   | <b>39</b> |
| 4.1 <i>Introduction</i> .....   | 39        |
| 4.2 <i>National policy frameworks and existing initiatives: an overview</i> .....                         | 39        |
| 4.2.1 <i>National policies and employment</i> .....   | 41        |
| 4.2.2 <i>National policies and conflict</i> .....   | 42        |
| 4.3 <i>Limitations and weaknesses of existing state-led initiatives</i> .....                             | 43        |
| 4.3.1 <i>Poor policy framework and implementation inadequacies</i> .....                                  | 43        |
| 4.3.2 <i>Under-funding and lack of state capacity</i> .....   | 44        |
| 4.3.3 <i>Lack of legislation-led programming</i> .....  | 44        |
| 4.3.4 <i>Official rhetoric, politicization and capture of youth initiatives</i> .....                     | 46        |
| 4.3.5 <i>Official bias towards educated and urban youth</i> .....   | 46        |
| 4.3.6 <i>Employment prioritized over education and skills training</i> .....                              | 47        |
| 4.3.7 <i>Wage labour prioritized over entrepreneurial development</i> .....                               | 48        |
| 4.3.8 <i>Lack of CSO and private sector partnership or involvement</i> .....                              | 48        |
| 4.3.9 <i>Loss of trust and confidence in state programmes</i> .....                                       | 49        |
| 4.3.10 <i>Ignoring exclusion</i> .....  | 50        |
| 4.4 <i>Conclusions and recommendations</i> .....  | 50        |
| <b>Chapter 5: Youth as the solution, not the problem</b> .....  | <b>52</b> |
| 5.1 <i>Introduction</i> .....   | 52        |
| 5.2 <i>What sustains vulnerable and excluded youth?</i> .....   | 53        |
| 5.2.1 <i>Civil society organizations</i> .....  | 53        |
| 5.2.2 <i>Sport and entertainment</i> .....  | 55        |
| 5.2.3 <i>Media: livelihoods and voice</i> .....   | 56        |
| 5.2.4 <i>Informal economic activities</i> .....   | 56        |
| 5.2.5 <i>Ideals and beliefs</i> .....   | 59        |
| 5.2.6 <i>Political activism</i> .....   | 60        |
| 5.3 <i>Explaining isolated cases of violence as a response to youth vulnerability and exclusion</i> ..... | 60        |
| 5.4 <i>Conclusions and recommendations</i> .....  | 61        |
| <b>Chapter 6: What needs to be done?</b> .....  | <b>62</b> |
| 6.1 <i>Key propositions resulting from the YOVEX study</i> .....  | 62        |
| 6.2 <i>Recommendations</i> .....  | 64        |
| <b>References</b> .....   | <b>67</b> |

# List of boxes and tables

|                  |  |
|------------------|--|
| <b>Box 2.1</b>   | Chapter summary  |
| <b>Box 2.2</b>   | Definition of youth in Ghana                               |
| <b>Box 2.3</b>   | Definitions of youth in seven West African countries       |
| <b>Box 3.1</b>   | Chapter summary  |
| <b>Box 3.2</b>   | Youth in Mali  |
| <b>Box 3.3</b>   | Niger's socio-economic context (2004 figures)              |
| <b>Box 4.1</b>   | Chapter summary  |
| <b>Box 4.2</b>   | The mission statement of Nigeria's National Youth Policy   |
| <b>Box 4.3</b>   | The Lagos Women Development Centre                         |
| <b>Box 4.4</b>   | Bayelsa State Second Chance Programme                      |
| <b>Box 4.5</b>   | National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) and the YES |
| <b>Box 4.6</b>   | National youth development centres                         |
| <b>Box 5.1</b>   | Chapter summary  |
| <b>Table 4.1</b> | Organizations that youth think help them most in Ghana     |



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In addition to a dedicated project team at CSDG in London, teams of researchers from the seven West African countries undertook the research. The country teams included:

- Ghana: Emmanuel Sowatey, Emma Birikorang and Sabiiti Mutengesa
- Guinea: Penda Diallo and Dave Wybrow
- Liberia: Thomas Jaye and Alfred K. Tarway-Twallah
- Mali: Boubacar Ndiaye
- Niger: Ousmane Ibrahim Mamam
- Nigeria: Dauda Garuba, Wale Ismail, Eka Ikpe, Funmi Olonisakin, Morten Hagen and Charles Alao
- Sierra Leone: Ismail Rashid, Ibrahim Abdullah and Joseph Goakia.

At CSDG, Wale Ismail helped co-ordinate the seven country studies.

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The views expressed here are, however, those of the named authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the UK government's DFID, Foreign Office and Ministry of Defence.

— **'Funmi Olonisakin**  
Director, CSDG

## Abbreviations and acronyms

|                 |   |
|-----------------|---|
| <b>APEJ</b>     | Agence pour la Promotion de l'Emploi des Jeunes           |
| <b>AU</b>       | African Union   |
| <b>AYC</b>      | African Youth Charter                                     |
| <b>CBO</b>      | community-based organization                              |
| <b>CSO</b>      | civil society organization                                |
| <b>DDR</b>      | disarmament, demobilization and reintegration             |
| <b>DFID</b>     | Department for International Development                  |
| <b>ECOWAS</b>   | Economic Community of West African States                 |
| <b>ECPF</b>     | ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework                      |
| <b>GDP</b>      | gross domestic product                                    |
| <b>GNI</b>      | gross national income                                     |
| <b>NAPEP</b>    | National Poverty Eradication Programme                    |
| <b>NDEBUMOG</b> | Niger Delta Budget Monitoring Group                       |
| <b>NGN</b>      | Nigerian naira  |
| <b>NGO</b>      | non-governmental organization                             |
| <b>PNPJ</b>     | Programme National de Promotion de la Jeunesse            |
| <b>SAP</b>      | structural adjustment programme                           |
| <b>TVET</b>     | Technical and Vocational Educational Training (programme) |
| <b>USD</b>      | United States dollar                                      |
| <b>YES</b>      | Youth Employment Scheme                                   |
| <b>YOVEX</b>    | Youth Vulnerability and Exclusion (study)                 |
| <b>UN</b>       | United Nations  |

The Youth Vulnerability and Exclusion (YOVEX) study was sponsored by the Department for International Development (DFID) in order to (1) stimulate debate on the security and development challenge posed by the demographic transition currently under way in West Africa; and (2) generate policy recommendations geared to the reduction of youth vulnerability and exclusion.

Towards these ends, the study interrogated the socio-economic, political and cultural plight of young people in selected West African countries and assessed the extent to which ongoing processes, initiatives and services meet the needs and aspirations of young people. The YOYEX study's pragmatic research approach mixed qualitative and quantitative methods, gave voice to young people, and led to practical policy recommendations.

Seven case studies were generated in countries selected to encompass both Anglophone and Francophone countries, including those recovering from armed conflicts and those that had not experienced intra-state warfare, but displayed state fragility characteristics (Ghana, Guinea, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria and Sierra Leone). The case studies confirmed the critical importance of local context for understanding the situation of youth, but also pointed towards common lessons relevant to the future design of youth programmes in West Africa.

First and foremost, the YOYEX study showed that African youth are resilient and resourceful and that there is no justification for the anxiety and panic often associated with policy debates about youth in Africa. YOYEX study investigations in all seven countries demonstrated that youth-based actions can create new dynamics, open up new opportunities, and mobilize scattered energies and skills to work towards security and development.

While the problems associated with the ongoing demographic transition are complex, the YOYEX study established that African youth offer a vast potential of energy, innovation and adaptability. By listening to them, promising entry points for public and voluntary initiatives were discovered. The study also found that the transformation that is sweeping Africa and opening up its economies, societies and politics is also opening space for African youth to assert themselves and participate in the decisions that affect their lives.

Secondly, the study highlighted that programmes aimed at addressing youth vulnerability and exclusion should take account of the ways in which the concept of youth is understood at the local level. Whereas prevailing international standards define youth as people aged 15–24 years, West African societies subscribe to a broader definition that takes account of the marital and employment status of individuals. Thus, people of up to 35 years of age may be included within the youth category. It follows that the continued adoption of international

standards for youth programming assistance exacerbates social tensions and perpetuates the exclusion of vulnerable older youth.

Thirdly, the study reaffirmed the strong correlation among youth vulnerability, lack of access to education and massive youth unemployment. It demonstrated that stalled aspirations in education and skills training are major causes of unemployment and grievance among youth and that the lack of access to formal and vocational training excludes young people from mainstream institutions and diverts their energies towards illegitimate economic activities.

Fourthly, the seven case studies found that traditional structural impediments continue to limit the participation of youth in politics, inhibit their representation in local and national decision-making processes, and encourage their resort to unorthodox means of influence, including political violence, rebellion and thuggery. Thus, youth attitudes towards formal involvement in politics vary depending on the governance environment. But it is notable that except for Nigeria and Niger, youth are positive towards political participation (i.e. voting). They are especially keen to express themselves through formal political processes in post-conflict societies (Liberia, Sierra Leone).

Fifthly, the case studies unearthed strong perceptions of poor policy formulation, planning, programming and implementation by state agencies. In too many instances, a genuine lack of state capacity and resources is combined with the politicization of youth initiatives (as tools of patronage); systematic under-funding; endemic corruption; and white elephant schemes that have no relevance to the genuine needs and aspirations of young people. A new policy stance that recognizes the human agency of Africa's youth, salutes their innovative survival strategies, and recognizes their potential contributions to Africa's security and development is urgently needed.

Sixthly, the diversity of conditions evinced by the YOVEX surveys definitely rules out a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to operational support. Instead, tailor-made assistance is needed to take account of stark differences among youth. In particular, the exceptionally severe constraints faced by female, rural and educationally deprived youth need focused attention.

Seventhly, the YOVEX study concluded that youth vulnerability and exclusion rarely translate into violent outcomes if social mediation is exercised by family and social networks, self-help associations, religious bodies, etc. In all seven countries, youth strongly identify with (and place unparalleled confidence in) one or more non-state institution – non-governmental organizations (NGOs), religious groups, community organizations, etc.

Youth perceive such collective endeavours as legitimate and effective sources of moral, socio-economic, political and even physical security. Not unexpectedly, such private and voluntary initiatives deliver much needed socio-economic, political and moral services to youth by tapping into a vast reservoir of workable ideas, resources and strategies fed by domestic and international sources. Unfortunately, more often than not, state-led initiatives and policies throughout West Africa supposedly aimed at the youth have yet to connect with these initiatives or even acknowledge them.

Eighthly, the seven case studies explored specific areas of policy emphasis that offer major potential for the upscaling of youth-based initiatives drawing on a booming culture

of resilience that include social entrepreneurship and ‘talent usage’ in sports, entertainment (music, acting and show business) and private small-scale enterprises (trading, commercial motorcycle transport, video rental clubs, etc.). Effective support to productive endeavours would help reverse the pull of illegal activities (e.g. smuggling, theft, etc.) and would also redefine the cultural landscape of society by reducing the demands on the state and encouraging self-help and creativity.

Based on these findings, the YOVEX study puts forward the following key propositions as being central to its analysis:

**Proposition 1:** *Youth in West Africa should be defined by local realities, as opposed to international standards.*

The YOVEX study found that the United Nations (UN)-derived notion of youth (especially its anchoring in the age bracket 15–24 years) is exclusionary. While age is an easily verifiable criterion for defining youth, it is not sufficient as a sole determinant, because it does not take into account the marginal socio-economic circumstances in which West Africans struggle to survive.

**Proposition 2:** *Youth exclusion and vulnerability are functions of a country’s context and governance.*

The YOVEX study found that the nature of the enabling governance environment at any point in time is a strong predictor of the extent of youth exclusion and vulnerability in the countries of West Africa. Where the socio-economic disempowerment of youth is linked to the level of economic endowment and underdevelopment, governance structures embody potentials to either moderate or aggravate youth exclusion and vulnerability.

**Proposition 3:** *Current state-led youth programmes are supply driven, unresponsive and short lived, and do not target, leverage or upscale the successful and durable initiatives of the private and voluntary sectors.*

A majority of government-led initiatives on youth are largely non-functional, non-participatory, short lived or driven by the calculation of immediate political gains. Where they appear to reflect the needs and aspirations of youth (e.g. unemployment), they become easily politicized, or desperately inadequate (relative to the scale of the problem at hand), and tend to have minimal impact on youth. Conversely, many initiatives undertaken by non-governmental actors and institutions, especially religious groups and youth associations, appear to be more responsive and effective in meeting the needs and aspirations of young people. The programme conception is less politicized, more participatory and grounded in local practices and priorities.

**Proposition 4:** *Youth exclusion and vulnerability do not lead to violent outcomes where mediating institutions channel youth energies into collaborative and productive activities.*

Only in relatively few cases do youth vulnerability and exclusion lead to extensive violent outcomes. Even in such cases, violence is often a means (as opposed to an end) whereby which youth seek to tap into the instrumentality of violence to create or defend socio-economic

and political privileges, and insert themselves into power structures controlled by political elites. The scope, reach and depth of informal structures and institutions in providing and delivering services to young people are immense. The range of services delivered include education, financial and medical assistance, acting as providers and finders of employment, and creating parallel structures for reintegrating or reconnecting with formal structures of the state. Also, the emphasis of some of these structures and pre-existing cultural constructs regarding non-violence and resilience reduce the prospect of violent outcomes from exclusion and vulnerability.

**Proposition 5:** *A wide range of opportunities exist for unleashing the agency and creativity of African youth in coping with their exclusion and vulnerability (sports/music, religion/faith, armed groups and informal economic activities).*

Youth possess immense creativity and resilience in coping with exclusion and vulnerability. Some involve legitimate/legal initiatives (commerce, informal economic activities and self-advocacy), while others are illegal or border on grey areas of the law (Internet fraud, cross-border smuggling, etc.). This creativity and resilience are underlined by young people's search for and creation of opportunities and resources to meet needs and aspirations like education, employment and subsistence living; to cater for parents and extended families; and to position themselves to set up independent households in the future. Youth coping mechanisms are frequently rooted in activities outside the realm of the state that generally facilitate social inclusion and enhance youth participation in productive activities.

**Proposition 6:** *More than national conditions, the local enabling environment determines whether the scattered energies of Africa's youth are channelled towards peaceful or violent pursuits.*

The conditions of and differences between societies where youth exclusion and vulnerability lead to violent and non-violent outcomes relate more to local dynamics. Such dynamics include the capacity, scope and social space for invention and creativity; the connections between informal structures and state/formal institutions and actors; and the depth of services and activities of NGOs.

In the light of this, the YOVEX study makes the following recommendations:

#### **To national governments:**

- Revise or prepare national youth policies that set out the reciprocal obligations of the state and youth, renew commitments, and provide viable platforms for collaboration and broad stakeholding between state and non-state institutions in youth development.
- Engage non-state actors – NGOs, religious groups and youth associations – in the design and delivery of youth services.
- Ensure that various state institutions demonstrate greater commitment to the implementation of a new or revised national youth policy through the creation of time-bound targets (in the form of **youth development goals**) and resource allocation.

- Adopt measures, mechanisms and benchmarks to track and monitor the extent to which youth interests are integrated into the priorities, policies and programmes of the key government ministries, departments and agencies that execute national youth policies.
- Create national platforms to recognize and support the development of organic youth leadership and active youth participation in the civic life of their communities and national politics as forums for the articulation, co-ordination and organization of different youth voices and interests across the country.
- Set up **national youth development funds** with contributions from state and non-state institutions (religious bodies, NGOs, youth groups, etc.).
- Remove structural impediments that restrict the participation and representation of youth in formal politics, especially decision-making processes (parliament, the cabinet, etc.).

#### **To voluntary sector groups (including youth associations):**

- Increase co-operation and co-ordination among existing voluntary sector organizations involved in youth services.
- Develop the capacity to access, influence and monitor public office holders and government institutions in order to ensure their sustained attention, transparency and action regarding national youth development agendas.
- Ensure that the programmes developed and implemented by national and international NGOs are both relevant, effective and beneficial to youth, and tap into local capacity.
- Leverage the skills and resources of national NGOs' members and partner organizations into long-term, self-sustaining programmes, and develop their capacity to define independent agendas rather than just seeking to implement the agendas of governments and international development agencies.
- Increase internal democracy, accountability and transparency in the raising and use of funds and in the treatment of all youth, particularly marginalized youth.
- Establish or upscale existing sub-regional coalitions and interactions to share ideas and resources, forge common objectives and co-ordinate strategies for seeking sub-regional approaches and interventions in order to augment national-level initiatives on youth development.

#### **To the private sector:**

- Increase support for state and non-state youth initiatives through greater financial intervention and policy alignment.
- Integrate youth development into corporate social responsibility strategies.
- Deepen and extend youth development initiatives beyond educated and urban youth.
- Develop youth-specific products and services.
- Partner with state and youth groups to develop more efficient strategies for bringing youth informal sector activities into official purview.



### To the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS):

- Refine and align the ECOWAS Youth Policy and the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (ECPF) to reflect the priority concerns of youth across the region.
- Facilitate legislation-led initiatives that reflect the priority concerns of youth in member states.
- Provide a platform for interaction between state-led and non-state processes aimed at regionwide youth empowerment.
- Partner with governments and youth associations to develop youth programmes and initiatives across national boundaries.
- Support a **regional voice of youth conference or festival** designed to build the capacity and connectivity of youth groups in specific areas of activity and to acknowledge and celebrate the creativity, innovation and resilience of young people.

### To DFID and other international development agencies:

- Use a nuanced and flexible definition of youth, as opposed to the current use of the 15–24 years criterion of the UN.
- Design programmes that selectively target priority youth issues and cohorts based on the case-by-case identification of promising initiatives ripe for upscaling.
- Encourage the design or updating of **national youth policies**, the creation of **national youth development funds** and the setting up of independent **national youth commissions** as vehicles for co-ordinated strategies for youth empowerment that leverage non-state actors rather than substitute for them.
- Provide targeted assistance to selected youth groups and associations so as to build their capacity for broad-based youth empowerment geared to the articulation and advocacy of youth interests through service delivery, lobbying and engagement with many different channels of influence.
- Support youth-focused research and data collection to improve policy formulation, planning, implementation and evaluation at the national, regional and international levels.
- Partner with regional bodies, especially ECOWAS, to develop youth programmes and initiatives across national boundaries.

# Chapter 1

## The YOVEX Study

### 1.1 Introduction

In 2006, the Conflict, Security and Development Group at King's College London launched an exploratory pilot study of youth exclusion and vulnerability in three West African countries (Liberia, Nigeria and Sierra Leone). This study aimed at improved understanding of youth exclusion and vulnerability in West Africa by identifying indices of youth exclusion, developing an assessment framework, ascertaining the causes and sources of youth vulnerability, and generating follow-up options. The study was rooted in a straightforward hypothesis, i.e. that youth exclusion and vulnerability are major challenges to development and security.

Children and youth are both victims and protagonists of armed conflict: (1) of the three million deaths worldwide related to violent conflict since 1990, two million are of children; (2) worldwide there are about 250,000 child soldiers; and (3) a majority of ex-combatants are youths, most of whom had been living under difficult conditions prior to the conflict. Across war-torn countries in West Africa, for example, young people constitute over 60 per cent of combatants. Both the victims and perpetrators of heinous human rights violations, they can make or break peace-building efforts.

West Africa provides an appropriate focus for a study on youth vulnerability and exclusion for a host of reasons. According to the World Bank, West Africa accounts for 31 per cent (245 million) of the 770 million people in sub-Saharan Africa. The estimated growth rates of 2.2 per cent (population) and 2.5 per cent (economy) foreground socio-economic challenges in the sub-region, including over 55 per cent of the population living under USD 1 per day. With an adult illiteracy rate of over 42 per cent, an average life expectancy of 46 years and a gross domestic product (GDP) per capita of USD 309 (relative to USD 470 for sub-Saharan Africa as a whole), the sub-region embodies the problems and challenges of development and security in acute forms. It is home to some of the poorest countries in the world, including Sierra Leone, Niger and Guinea, among others. Since 1990, it has experienced multiple civil wars in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Guinea-Bissau and Côte d'Ivoire; widespread low-intensity conflicts in Nigeria, Ghana, Mali and Niger; and considerable civil disobedience in places like Guinea and Senegal.

Yet there are important differentiations in the character and peculiar dynamics of states in the sub-region, especially in their position on the political transition continuum. There are states with seemingly successful political transitions from authoritarian to democratic rule (Mali, Ghana and Benin); states with fractured or stalled or dysfunctional political transitions (Nigeria, Niger, Gambia and Togo); and states where genuine transition is yet to

begin (Guinea, Burkina Faso and Guinea-Bissau). Moreover, the ECOWAS region is host to countries transiting from armed conflict (Côte d'Ivoire) and those seeking to consolidate post-conflict peace and security (Sierra Leone). More importantly, the sub-region has become a major laboratory for testing old and inventing new approaches to peace-building, and the sub-regional body (ECOWAS) has become the frontline organization in political and security integration in Africa.

Admittedly, the ECOWAS sub-region has recorded a remarkable drop in the occurrence and intensity of civil wars over the past five years as a result of opportunistic circumstances and the more effective co-ordination of local, sub-regional and international efforts. However, the reduction in high-intensity conflicts rarely masks the widespread continuation of interne-cine sub-national clashes and political disruptions. States across the sub-region share experiences of socio-political insurrections and disruptions in varying degrees. The cross-cutting nature of structural challenges faced by these states magnifies the interconnectedness of development and security in important ways. The issues include troubled political transitions from authoritarian rule; governance deficits connected to weak democratic structures and practices; poor economic performance and development and contestations over the (mis)management of natural resources; state incapacity and poor policy frameworks; demographic changes, limited socio-economic opportunities, migration and rapid urbanization; and the inability of states to guarantee security.

In all of this, youth and youth issues have emerged as key precursors, drivers and challenges at the intersection of development and security in West Africa. The various cases and typologies of political disruption are characterized by the centrality of youth as purveyors and victims of insecurity. The realities of the sub-region hosting ten of the estimated 31 states experiencing a youth bulge in Africa and of youth straddling the development–security challenges of the sub-region were duly acknowledged by ECOWAS in its 2008 ECPF, where dealing with the challenges of youth is identified as a major conflict prevention issue.

## 1.2 Pilot phase

The pilot phase of the project fine-tuned the research tools and succeeded in giving voice to the young and insecure. Tailor-made questionnaires guided by ethical standards were tested and used by local partner organizations to secure basic information on respondents, identify their major preoccupations, describe their participation in youth programmes, pinpoint the influences that most affected their situation and obtain their views as to priorities for future public action. Focus group discussions were held in recognized youth assembly sites (e.g. schools, street hang-out spots, local markets, sports centres, etc.) so as to represent a broad spectrum of youth characteristics (gender, religion, rural/urban domains, marital status, literacy and educational levels, occupations, etc.).

The surveys confirmed that, along with age, social, marital and educational characteristics should be considered relevant to the definition of youth, so that the age bracket that defines the young should extend to 35 years in West Africa – in contrast to the internation-

ally sanctioned ceiling of 24 years. The surveys also helped to identify major sources of youth exclusion in the social, economic, political and security spheres. The overarching importance of poverty, employment, disease and homelessness as key sources of fear and worry was confirmed.

Harassment by public officials emerged as a frequent source of concern, given the many official constraints on informal sector activities. In particular, the surveys identified a pervasive fear of arbitrary behaviour by the police and other security services. Among other prominent sources of anxiety, homelessness and disease ranked high. Bad governance, corruption and political violence also figured prominently on the list of prominent anxieties.

Against this background, the most salient finding of the pilot phase was the remarkable creativity of African youth, as evidenced by their broad range of resourceful survival strategies. They supported themselves by a relatively high level of informal employment that was not captured by official statistics. The extraordinary influence of non-state actors also pointed to the vast potential of culture as a shock absorber for traumatic events and as a means of social change. Equally, the dominant role of radio and newspapers as amplifiers of youth concerns emerged as highly significant. So was the popularity of the option of exiting from interaction with state-led and institutions and processes among promising youths and its inevitable consequence: a flourishing illegal human trafficking trade. Equally, the proliferation of armed gangs could be traced to a search for security and respect by marginalized youths.

On the basis of the findings in this phase, this study put forward the following key propositions as being central to its analysis:

- Youth in West Africa are defined by local realities as opposed to international standards.
- Youth exclusion and vulnerability are a function of a country's context and governance.
- Current state-led youth programmes are supply driven, unresponsive and short lived, and they do not target, leverage or upscale the successful and durable initiatives of the private and voluntary sectors.
- Youth exclusion and vulnerability do not lead to violent outcomes where mediating institutions channel youth energies into collaborative and productive activities.
- A wide range of opportunities exist for unleashing the agency and creativity of African youth in coping with their exclusion and vulnerability (sports/music, religion/faith, armed groups and informal economic activities).
- More than national conditions, the local enabling environment determines whether the scattered energies of Africa's youth are channelled towards peaceful or violent pursuits.

### 1.3 Second phase

The second phase of the YOVEX study covered seven countries in an attempt to validate the pilot phase propositions and examine the coping mechanisms, resources and initiatives that sustain youth in a context where poorly designed policies and the inactions of formal

state institutions have increased exclusion and vulnerability. Given that standard remedies (education reform, health system expansion, community development, etc.) take time to take hold, the YOVEX study concentrated on informal mechanisms of youth participation that can help mitigate youth vulnerability and exclusion and open up new avenues of youth engagement in economically productive and socially beneficial programmes. Thus, the study observed and listened to African youth in order to discover promising entry points for public, private and voluntary initiatives. The presumption was that youth-based actions could create new dynamics, open up new opportunities, and mobilize scattered energies and skills in the quest for security and development.

The second phase was guided by four main themes:

- *youth identity*, which refers to the factors that shape the meaning and identity of youth;
- *the context of exclusion and vulnerability*, which refers to how, what, when and where youth become excluded and vulnerable;
- *coping mechanisms*, which refer to the resources, actors, institutions and dynamics that youth turn to or that accommodate youth and meet their varied needs; and
- *outcomes*, which refer to the different forms of outcomes, consequences and impacts of youth exclusion and vulnerabilities.

This study was carried out in seven countries:

1. Ghana
2. Guinea
3. Liberia
4. Mali
5. Niger
6. Nigeria
7. Sierra Leone.

## 1.4 Project concept

The concept of youth in Africa is best seen as a social construct rather than being simply defined as an age group. Hence, the YOVEX study challenged the standard definition of youth, especially the UN age-based definition of youth (limited to the 15–24 years age category), as it is not relevant to the social realities and cultural protocols prevalent in Africa, where the concept of youth gives precedence to marital and employment status over chronological and biological considerations.

To be sure, chronology has a place, given its self-evident biological content and the influence of external cultural influences and norms. But the project also recognizes that in the current economic and social circumstances of Africa, the UN definition is too rigid: it is mostly a reflection of the standards and life cycles that became prevalent in industrialized

countries in response to socialization patterns shaped by political participation, access to public education and training, social rituals, life styles, entertainment, sports, etc.

Such norms and protocols do not fit current social and cultural realities in Africa. Indeed, the cosmopolitan orientation of the international human rights discourse guided by officially validated age phases (e.g. regarding the Convention on the Rights of the Child) is perceived as intrusive by African policymakers and a new form of conditionality. Equally, the eligibility tests of international aid programmes based on age ranges are criticized as tools of social exclusion, since age may have little relevance to the targeting of badly needed public assistance (e.g. to former combatants seeking reintegration into their communities).

Thus, without entirely rejecting the chronological concept of youth, the project endorsed the view that the notion of youth in Africa is socially constructed and context dependent. This does not preclude an admission that youth in Africa are going through a socio-economic and political transition. In a context of disrupted education, structural adjustment, political instability, civil strife, famine and disease (especially HIV/AIDS), the transition from childhood to adulthood can stall and become prolonged, disrupted or postponed for a majority of youth.

This opens the need for multiple typologies capable of explicating the varying boundary lines that mark the entry and exit thresholds of the youth cohort; the dynamics of transnational and local influences on youth behaviour; the varying impacts that patriarchy and matriarchy may have on the livelihoods of young people; and the evolving interface among youth, maturity and old age in the realm of national and local politics.

Thus, the project used a comprehensive socio-economic approach that nevertheless acknowledged the growing ascendancy of chronological concepts under the impact of modernity. This approach takes account of the far-reaching political transformation currently under way in Africa in response to popular aspirations, the spread of democracy, and the growing influence of international and regional organizations. It reflects the evolving context within which youth policies are framed, and recognizes the new energies being unleashed by the nascent civil society and the role that imported ideas and mores are playing in shaping the future of the continent.

This eclectic view regarding context and concepts led to a sceptical stance with respect to the sensational linkages often drawn among youth, crime and delinquency; the popular depiction of youth as passive victims; and the frequent characterization of the 'youth bulge' as a problem, whereas it can also be an opportunity. Thus, the intellectual approach of the project embodied a 'bias towards hope' that recognized the social agency of African youth, saluted their innovative survival strategies and explored the potential contributions that they can make to the development of Africa. This is because the YOVEX study is mostly *about* youth and its role in Africa – rather than only *for* youth as an age group deserving privileged treatment.

## 1.5 The nature of youth exclusion and vulnerability

From the background papers, the project defined youth exclusion and vulnerability from a top-down, state-focused perspective. *Exclusion* refers to the relative distance of youth from

the epicentre of structures and processes that shape their daily individual and collective existence (i.e. their living standards). In other words, it is about the lack of representation of youth and their inability to contribute to or influence the decisions and policies that determine their lives. *Vulnerability* refers to the relative risk youth run of experiencing a lower living standard, often for a great length of time or even permanently. It refers to the subjective feeling and/or objective state of insecurity, and to the fears and dangers of a decline in the well-being of youth.

The framework assumed that vulnerability and exclusion are more subjective than objective, given that vulnerability and exclusion are relative phenomena. In other words, the living standard that youth use as the threshold to measure their particular situation is more appropriately defined by comparison between themselves and other individuals, households or groups found either in their immediate community (or country) or across international borders, as facilitated by television (the 'MTV effect', Hollywood, Nollywood, etc.) and the planetary flows of information in their various forms.

The framework also sees a strong, although complex, connection between youth vulnerability and exclusion. Specifically, it sees vulnerability as resulting from exclusion or obstacles to inclusion. The excluded are most likely to suffer from low living standards. Thus, youth vulnerability is a manifestation of the exclusion of young people from the processes and structures of decision-making in societies. Consequently, the framework locates both youth vulnerability and exclusion as manifestations of disempowerment resulting from young people's lack of participation and representation in formal processes.

## 1.6 Methodology

The YOVEX study used mainly qualitative surveys and interpretations of situations and events, without discounting the use and importance of quantitative indicators. Three methods were used to generate empirical data: questionnaires, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, which gave voice to the young and insecure. The format, contents and structure of survey instruments were adapted to the local dynamics of each case study. The target populations were clustered to reflect the diversity of youth characteristics and experience. Thus, selective targeting was practised across diverse regions to access rural and urban, literate and illiterate, and employed and unemployed youth; as well as students and non-students, and males and females. Empirical research was carried out with local partner organizations, and the instruments used were all designed to secure basic information on respondents, identify their major preoccupations, describe their participation in youth programmes, pinpoint the most important sources of influence on their conditions and obtain their views as to priorities for future public action. The questionnaires were administered and the focus group discussions were held in recognized youth assembly sites (e.g. schools, street hang-out spots, local markets, sports centres, etc.) that were selected to represent, as far as possible, a broad spectrum of youth characteristics (gender, religion, rural/urban domains, marital status, literacy and educational levels, occupation, etc.).



## 1.7 Organization of the report

The remainder of this report is structured as follows:

- Chapter 2: Young people and youth-hood
- Chapter 3: How does context matter?
- Chapter 4: What are governments doing?
- Chapter 5: Youth as the solution, not the problem
- Chapter 6: What needs to be done?



## Chapter 2

# Young people and youth-hood

### 2.1 Introduction

The concept of youth across sub-Saharan West Africa is both an indeterminate age group and a social rank of powerful significance. Attempts to define youth for policy purposes collide with this ambiguity. Not all young people – e.g. young urbanites with families, social standing, access to resources, political influence, etc. – can be adequately described as youth in a uniform sense. Conversely, many of those regarded as youth – e.g. single men in rural areas in their 40s without children, unmarried women and younger siblings without familial entitlements – are often not even particularly young.

*Youth-hood* – as opposed to youth – is widely understood as a status ascribed variously within the family, at work and in society at large denoting relations to entitlements, social hierarchies and decision-making processes. As such, it is often part of patterns of patronage and favouritism (and therefore patterns of exclusion), and of social mechanisms supportive of stability, security and dispute resolution (and thereby linked in times of social breakdown to instability, insecurity and conflict).

We found that the typologies of youth-hood – e.g. male/female, rural/urban, modern/traditional – were insufficiently addressed by the simple age groups defined by different national youth policies, where long, officially sanctioned youth periods represent an attempt to capture the complexity of youth-hood. The difficulty is reflected in the failure of policies to fully engage with disadvantaged young people, especially those officially considered to be too young or too old; those excluded from beneficial social networks and therefore beyond the reach of simple age-defined policies and practices; or those that simply exit youth-hood (as defined above) to pursue autonomous commercial activity, informal money-making opportunities or crime.

Overall, we found national youth policies to be caught between liberal-democratic assumptions of equality before the law, equal opportunities and the free movement of labour, and the realities of relationship-based patterns of advantage and disadvantage, where youth-hood is part of the rationing of power, resources and status.

#### Box 2.1: Chapter summary

This chapter describes youth-hood across West Africa as a varying social construct and explains the limitations of narrow age-bound definitions of youth. It reports on young peoples' views of youth-hood in times of demographic change, social upheaval and economic difficulty. It acknowledges the significance of youth-hood as a social rank tied to patterns of entitlements, status and social advantage, and the contradictions and difficulties this throws up for policymakers and young people alike. It underlines gender differentials; the rural-urban divide; the emergence of new, hybrid youth sub-cultures; and the place of older men within the category of youth. It ends with simple recommendations for refocusing youth policies for the broader benefit of young Africans.

Beyond a concern with age limits, the YOVEX study showed that there is a politics of youth-hood that is itself partly exclusionary by definition, but that has a clear role in patterns of social stability, while also becoming a flashpoint when accepted routes to adulthood become hard to find in circumstances of rapid population growth, failing governance, urbanization and resource depletion – particularly where these coincide with declining work opportunities and breakdowns in education and the supply of public goods.

In difficult country contexts where young people are a burgeoning majority, youth are doubly excluded: firstly by traditional perceptions of them as not being entitled to the rights and privileges of full adulthood, and secondly by the incapacity of societies and unreformed youth policies to fulfil their expectations.

However, although we acknowledge that youth-hood is often most visible in terms of its pressure points, we found that a deeper, more thorough-going and widespread trend lay in the way in which young Africans are themselves extending notions of youth-hood to side-step blocked routes to prosperity, compensate for the scarcity of public goods, open up new activities aimed at fostering their own and society's well-being, and realize a greater potential for enabling social change and adaptation.

In the YOVEX study, three key tasks were undertaken in relation to the nature and meaning of youth:

- firstly, a survey of national-level policy definitions of youth in order to assess their relationship to either the UN or African Union (AU)/ECOWAS definition;
- secondly, a survey among young people across the case studies to analyse their definitions of and assumptions concerning youth-hood; and
- finally, an interrogation of connections between socio-cultural practices and youth-hood to assess convergence with age-based criteria and the extent to which old and new cultural influences are expressed in shifting national and international understandings of youth.

Our assumption was that interrogating the definition, identity and significance of youth-hood has implications for policy and practice as to where and how best to relate to youth and youth perspectives in times of rapid social change.

We found youth-hood across West Africa to be a composite aggregation of variables, with the significance and identity of the concept varying among different groups: male and female, educated and uneducated, rural and urban; with age a key variable among the urban, educated young; marital status among females and the uneducated; and social roles and responsibilities among rural dwellers. Where age matters, it is often along national definitions – with considerable local variation – as opposed to international/UN standards.

## 2.2 Youth as an age group

According to the UN, a youth is anyone between the ages of 15 and 24 years. The World Bank, in its youth-focused *World Development Report 2007: Development and the Next Generation*,

expanded the category (qualified as ‘young people’) to include people as young as 12 years, reflecting the concern with potential labour supplies. Overall, 24 years has emerged as the international standard upper age limit for youth.

The UN definition, as much as the World Bank’s expanded category of young people, reflects the reality of youth as a stage of transition in different spheres of life. The World Bank asserts that ‘decisions during five youth transitions have the biggest long-term impacts on how human capital is kept safe, developed, and deployed; continuing to learn, starting to learn, starting to work, developing a healthful lifestyle, beginning a family, and exercising citizenship’.<sup>1</sup>

In the context of sub-Saharan Africa – and West Africa in particular – the policy definitions of youth vary considerably from the UN standard. The AU at its 2006 Heads of States conference in Banjul, Gambia, formally adopted the first continental youth policy framework – the African Youth Charter (AYC) – where an African perspective on youth and youth issues was first espoused. The AYC defines youth as ‘every person between the ages of 15 and 35 years’.<sup>2</sup> It also provides a broad norm-setting platform in relation to the rights and obligations of youth and state parties. The AYC lead has been followed by ECOWAS since 2007 through its inclusion of youth and youth issues in its ECPF and draft 2008 Youth Policy, in which the AU definition was reaffirmed.

## 2.3 National policy definitions of youth

Across the seven case studies, the YOVEX study found a consistent pattern of officially defining youth by age using much higher upper age limits compared to international standards, accompanied by flexibility in relation to the provisions of the AYC and ECOWAS Youth Policy to reflect national-level peculiarities. In Ghana, Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone, official definitions of youth align with the AYC qualification of persons between 15 and 35 years. In Nigeria, the country’s 2001 National Youth Policy adopts a similar upper-tier benchmark of 35 years, but the lower-tier age is 18 years. The choice of 18 as the point of entry into youth-hood aligns with the country’s minimum voting age. In Niger and Mali, ‘youth’ covers persons between 14 and 30 years, and 15 and 40 years, respectively.

Importantly, Mali and Ghana offer additional qualifications to the age-based definitions of youth. In Ghana, youth is further qualified as ‘anyone who is acknowledged by deed as identifying with and committed to youth development’. In Mali, the upper boundary of youth-hood is extended to include persons beyond age 35. The 2005

### Box 2.2: Definition of youth in Ghana

In Ghana, youth are defined as: ‘Young men and women who fall within the age brackets 15–35. Further, anyone who is acknowledged by deed as identifying with and committed to youth development may be considered as youth.’

Source: 1999 Ghana Youth Policy

1 World Bank, *World Development Report 2007*, 2.

2 AU, African Youth Charter, 3.

Programme National de Promotion de la Jeunesse (PNPJ) broadened the definition of youth with policy statements concerning employment, leisure, culture, education, social vulnerability and communications. The PNPJ defines the stage of youth as:

*a period of life situated between the acquisition of psychological and physical autonomy and the completion of the biological and psychological growth process. Youth is a moment, a short period of life during which one acquires the social competencies and potentialities that will prepare one for the responsibilities and trials of adult life.*

The PNPJ also makes an interesting differentiation between ‘youth’ and ‘young’, defining the latter as ‘all persons whose age is between 10 and 35’.

Taking youth to represent a transitional phase into adulthood, the UN definition suggests a ten-year transition period, while the AYC/ECOWAS framework points to a 20-year period during which young people navigate this transition in terms of education, employment, citizenship and social relations. A majority of the case studies clearly align with the AYC/ECOWAS 20-year period of transition, with slight variations by Nigeria (a 17-year period), Mali (a 25-year period) and Niger (a 16-year period).

Explanations for official definitions of a long youth-hood lie in attempts to capture the complexities of youth-hood, as well as simply, perhaps, to extend eligibility criteria – and the benefit that this is assumed to bring – to as many people as possible. The YOVEX study considered a further possible logical basis for understanding the longer transition period in West Africa, i.e. the socio-economic and political context of most countries, where there is the realization that harsh socio-economic conditions and political disruptions (especially protracted conflicts) hinder the transition of young people into adulthood. The fact that almost all the countries studied formulated their youth policies (and definitions of youth) in the post-Cold War era – a period associated with serious socio-economic and political challenges across West Africa – is a pointer to this. The need for a longer transition period (relative to the UN estimation) is most demonstrated in the post-conflict societies of Sierra Leone and Liberia, where prolonged civil wars (over a ten-year period) disrupted education and economic activities, dislocated these countries’ population, and destroyed critical infrastructures.

The demographic youth bulge and the huge socio-economic and cultural variations among youth, youth-hood, and typologies of hardship and disenfranchisement in different locales make the choice of which age criterion to use (the UN/international standard or local/national definitions), as well as the need to move beyond age-bound definitions altogether, key challenges to youth-related programming, especially by international development agencies and NGOs with field operations in West Africa.

### **Box 2.3: Definitions of youth in seven West African countries**

- 1. Ghana:** 15 to 35 years (20-year period)
- 2. Guinea:** 15 to 35 years (20-year period)
- 3. Liberia:** 15 to 35 years (20-year period)
- 4. Mali:** 15 to 40 years (25-year period)
- 5. Niger:** 14 to 30 years (16-year period)
- 6. Nigeria:** 18 to 35 years (17-year period)
- 7. Sierra Leone:** 15 to 35 years (20-year period)

## 2.4 Young people's views of youth-hood

The YOVEX survey revealed that subjective views of age and spheres of activity qualified by socially defined roles and expectations are key elements in young people's self-perception of themselves as youth or non-youth. Rarely did such views conform to official definitions alone.

Across the seven case studies, between 70 and 80 per cent of respondents regarded themselves as youth on the basis of age. In Mali, for instance, people typically considered themselves youth 'because I am full of vigour' or because 'I can do hard physical work', 'I do not have white hair', 'I am less than 45, or 50', etc. Some respondents also assumed that their participation in youthful activities – including football, wrestling and running – and civic duties denoted their youth. This description of youth as a combination of age, activity and obligation occurred across most youth clusters, including rural and urban, educated and uneducated, and employed and unemployed respondents.

Although age always emerged as a relevant marker of youth-hood, age brackets were rarely fixed or clear, but always context dependent and qualified by other factors. This is captured by a 31-year-old male respondent in Sierra Leone:

*I am youth and I strongly feel that within me everywhere I go. My age is within the bracket stipulated by the Sierra Leone National Youth Policy . . . But I believe that age does not count. What one does is what matters. I often participate in many youth activities in the community. I play football and engage in developmental projects . . . like exercise and repairing feeder roads.*

Interestingly, age was cited more by male than female respondents in their definition of youth, with more female respondents citing marital status, and especially motherhood, as a major disqualification from youth-hood.

Other factors emerged. In Liberia, for instance, 73 per cent of respondents considered age a chief marker of youth-hood, 20 per cent identified social roles and obligations, 4 per cent cited marital status, and 3 per cent pinpointed education. In Sierra Leone, respondents defined their youth-hood through age (68 per cent), social roles and activities (18 per cent), society's opinion (5 per cent), wealth (4 per cent) and marital status (4 per cent). In Ghana, 86 per cent of respondents claimed they were youth on the basis of their age, 4 per cent linked their youth-hood to being energetic or taking part in high-energy/physical activities, 3 per cent claimed youth-hood because they were yet to marry, and about 7 per cent did not know why they referred to themselves as youths.

In Guinea, 80 per cent of those surveyed said that deferment to adults and elders (in decision-making, but also during everyday activities such as mealtimes or while travelling on public transport) was a key component and indicator of youth-hood.

Of the respondents who claimed to have passed beyond youth-hood, 54 per cent cited their married status and just 19 per cent cited their age as the explanation for this. Interestingly, over 60 per cent of those who cited marital status as denoting their youth or adult status were women.

Youth-hood and livelihoods were also closely related in both rural and urban contexts, with family status, family connections and quid pro quo arrangements underlying access to

jobs. One young man in Guinea explained: ‘Our societies are not structured like those of the whites. Here it is not your qualifications that count, but where you come in the chain of connections.’ Another respondent wept as he described how his application to a local business funding scheme had been rejected three times in favour of those of better-connected, more ‘senior’ applicants.

Further descriptions of youth-hood revealed deep connections to embedded – but changing – culturally sustained socio-economic assumptions concerning the stratification of male society in relation to women and, increasingly, a direct association with new kinds of autonomy associated with modernity and new technology. Four such significant areas of change appear to be common across the case studies: gender roles, the rural–urban divide, traditional versus modern conceptions of youth-hood and age differentials within youth-hood itself. These are discussed below.

### 2.4.1 Gender

The YOVEX survey observed that young males and females of the same age were often not considered to be youth in the same way. In Mali, 62 per cent of respondents noted differences in what qualified young males and females as youth. Of this sample, 67 per cent were females and 33 per cent males, indicating gendered perspectives of youth-hood: male perspectives pinpoint the centrality of age and activity/energy levels, while female perspectives highlight a combination of age, marital status and social roles.

In Guinea, for example, respondents agreed that the difference between male and female youth was crucial. Respondents generally conceived this difference as an accepted set of assumptions eliding biological difference and normalized gender roles centred on occupation. Males were described as long lived, advantaged, free to travel and innovate, strong, etc., while females were described as weak, disadvantaged, confined to the home and, in a surprising number of cases, short lived and disease prone. Respondents stated that females’ youth time tended to be shorter than males’, with male youth given more freedom compared to females. A common point was that women did most of the household chores such as cooking and laundry, and, as a result, had less time to undertake activities such as sport or youth association activities. According to one respondent, ‘a male is free; therefore he has the time to further his knowledge in comparison with a female who is at home doing the laundry. Girls are made to think that it is not good to give girls too much freedom compared to males.’

While people of 30 or 40 years of age can be considered youth if they are unmarried and unemployed, many girls are married at 16 or by their early 20s. Once they are married, they are considered adult, regardless of how young they are.

For males, marriage and employment offer higher status within society in formalized ways. The married man is seen as the head of a family once he has an income to sustain his family. This gives the married man access to shared places and spaces with elders and adults, and with this come contacts and social, political and commercial information.

These differences have implications for policy and programming, especially in developing initiatives and techniques for targeting and meeting the needs of male and female young people of similar age within similar socio-economic contexts.



## 2.4.2 Rural versus urban youth-hood

The YOVEX study observed differences in the identity, composition, and function of youth-hood in rural and urban West Africa.

Rural youth-hood is strongly linked to place, with customary cohorts, often exclusively male, participating in highly structured ritualized routines of socio-economic activity and subject to strict forms of morality-based social control.

In urban contexts, youth-hood tends to be defined more by age, education and livelihood opportunities, as opposed to the membership of groups. As such, urban youth-hood reflects male and female dimensions, is less constrained by morality-based social control, and exhibits greater – though often controversial – flexibility and adaptability in its choice of activities.

In Mali, rural youth-hood is widely defined by notions of the Kamalinw and Kamalinya (young men specifically) derived from the dominant Mandé culture. The Kamalinya cohort is seen to be central to a society that is agrarian and to a culture steeped in and organized around age groupings and cohorts where old age is revered and youth celebrated, both playing important and interdependent roles. This youth-hood entails a complex culture of gradual maturation marking the acquisition of physical, material and psychological abilities required to meet the needs of the immediate family and community and the willingness to endure hardship, to be obedient and deferent toward older people, and even to personify certain predispositions and values – physical and moral courage, for example.

Similarly, in Ghana, rural youth are often identified with the Asafo cohort. Asafo companies are the traditional youth groups of some Akan societies and they were in pre-colonial times the warrior groups of such societies. Age was not (and is still not) the sole criterion: the heads of Asafo companies are often people way above the official age limit of 35 years, and are in most instances people in their late 50s.

In urban contexts, the presence or influence of such customary cohorts is often replaced by that of youth clubs and associations (self-help groups). In urban case studies, a majority of male youth belonged to youth sports (football) or social clubs (youth bases) or youth wings of religious (church and mosque) movements that in many ways continue rural youth-hood cultures as modern hybrids.

## 2.4.3 Traditional versus conceptions of modern youth-hood

The YOVEX study also observed arising from the discourse of rural and urban youth-hood, but occurring within both urban and rural locales, emerging changes marking a divide between old (customary) and new (modern) ideas of youth; with the former connected to notions of subservience, conformism, and the passive receipt of order and instructions, and the latter associated with consumerism, active media-savvy agency and assertiveness (often regarded as rebelliousness). This divide relates closely to rural–urban and male–female differentials and signals partial transformations in youth-hood in the context of globalization and the influence of neoliberal orthodoxy.

In Sierra Leone and Nigeria, for instance, youth-hood is increasingly associated with the appropriation of violence; ‘new media’ such as music, comedy and entertainment; new

technology; and the ability to form new social networks and engage state and society according to new terms of recognition. In many ways, this marks the development of youth sub-cultures in the modern sense. This is a marked departure from old notions of youth-hood, where engagement with state and society was associated with occupational roles (especially farming), membership of age-grade cohorts and family/kinship ties. In the post-conflict societies of Liberia and Sierra Leone, the contemporary notion of youth is strongly linked to violence (with ex-combatant status a feature of this). In Nigeria, new ideas about and identities for youth are often linked to ‘militant’ status (in the Niger Delta) or membership of ethnic militias, vigilante groups or youth wings of political parties. In Niger as well, a majority of youth in urban centres were found to have created or be members of ‘Fada’, i.e. informal district youth groups sometimes associated with anti-social behaviour in neighbourhoods.

The divide was equally marked in Guinea, although with controversy surrounding the actions of ‘anti-social elements’. It is important to note that in all the case studies, such controversies arise among the young themselves as much as between the generations, and the role of violence within disenfranchised youth sub-cultures, as opposed to the brutalization of youth by internal national conflicts, needs careful analysis from context to context.

#### 2.4.4 Older versus younger youth

We found age to be an issue within youth-hood itself. Older youth are those in the upper tier of the youth age group, say, above 30 years, often denoted by being out of school or beyond school-going age. Younger youth are typically under the age of 30, often still in education or at least of school age.

Different kinds of issues affect the two categories, with older youth appearing to be more concerned with lack of employment opportunities, while younger youth were more concerned with the availability and cost of education and skills training.

In the absence of sufficient jobs or affordable school places, older youth look for status outside of adulthood by taking up positions as leaders or representatives of youth. In post-war Sierra Leone, for example, people, typically men, even up to the age of 50, continue to claim youth status as ‘youth men’ and tend to present themselves as leaders and representatives of youth in meetings at the district level.

In some areas of Ghana, a new social position has evolved from this. The role of youth chief is a recognized local office constructed partly out of chieftaincy traditions and partly out of municipal administrative procedures. The youth chief sits on developmental committees and also acts as mentor to young people in the area through local meetings, interactions, report-backs, etc.

### 2.5 Conclusions and recommendations

To an extent, youth-hood is itself a means of exclusion – part of the social rationing of power and resources and a means of ordering entitlements. National youth policies are therefore faced with the contradiction of leveraging the welfare of a burgeoning population of huge potential power from a stand-point that positions young people as secondary citizens-in-waiting.



**Recommendation:** *The World Bank preference for addressing the needs of young people in general rather than youth as a definite sub-set should be followed in order to open out the support agenda to include women and girls, those with families, those starting businesses, those transiting from rural to urban settings, etc.*

Youth-hood is defined as much through social position, access to influence and resources, and family status as it is by age. It is linked to patterns of both privilege and exclusion. Simple age-defined notions of youth do not capture this complexity, and policies derived from such notions cannot address damaging inequalities. These policies therefore fail to engage with many of those in need of support.

**Recommendation:** *One-size-fits-all age-bound national definitions of youth should be abandoned or framed to allow the identification of locally defined target groups deriving from cyclical local needs analysis.*

Youth-hood is changing. As a cultural construct it reflects socio-economic pressures and trends across the region. Four topical areas stand out:

1. the rural–urban divide;
2. traditional youth-hood in comparison with modern youth sub-culture;
3. the different pressures affecting older people still considering themselves to be youth; and
4. gender differentials.

**Recommendation:** *Research should be targeted on these key areas, and national youth policies should consider the relevance of themed provision along these or other nationally appropriate lines.*

The contradictions of youth-hood are being worked out by young people themselves at the local level. Youth-hood is changing in ways that are marked by controversy, but the concept still plays an important role as part of the fabric of social cohesion – particularly where ideas of respect, moral courage and civic responsibility are carried forward into new hybrid identities.

**Recommendation:** *Care must be taken not to damage organic cultural trends through which the pressures of globalization on young Africans are being addressed. The need is rarely for massive interventions that set out to rescue or control youth. The capacity to work intelligently and locally alongside young people is crucial in doing no harm to fledgling activities that already denote new, positive youth identities.*

The role violence plays in relation to youth may be a transitory element arising as part of self-asserting youth sub-cultures, an aspect of criminal activity or part of the appropriation of young people to broader conflicts. Each case needs careful study. Top-down policies that seek to address the issue of violence in isolation or through age-defined approaches are likely to misunderstand and confuse these issues.

**Recommendation:** *Policies should acknowledge the leadership and expertise of young people themselves in understanding local trends and identifying where routes to the amelioration of violence – where it occurs – may lie.*

## How does context matter?

### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter synthesizes observations and findings on the patterns, trends, and causes of youth vulnerability and exclusion in the seven case studies. Admittedly, each country presents unique socio-economic, cultural and political conditions and dynamics; however, it is not impossible to construct linkages and similarities among the structural conditions, processes and manifestations of youth vulnerability and exclusion. Thus, the YOVEX study attempts to situate the structures, processes and experiences of youth vulnerability and exclusion first in the local and national context, and then

makes a case for cross-national patterns. Through this, attention is drawn to the need firstly to assess policy and practice, in order to understand the plight of youth as a derivative of national governance environment; and, secondly, to consistently localize interventionist programmes and be prepared to look out for and be sensitive to sub-regional linkages and similarities.

#### Box 3.1: Chapter summary

The plight of youth is a derivative of the national governance environment, notwithstanding the preconditions of levels of economic (under)development, natural resources endowment, state incapacity and the youth bulge. The most important issues in the vulnerability of youth are education and skills training, unemployment, and armed conflicts. The lack of representation and participation (other than voting) in formal politics and decision-making institutions as a result of systemic rules that define eligibility solely in terms of age is a major form and source of exclusion. Still, different issues affect different categories of youth in varying intensities and proportions – older youth tend to be affected most by unemployment, and younger youth most by issues around education and skills training.

### 3.2 Issues in youth vulnerability

The YOVEX study observed that socio-economic issues connected to unemployment, education and poverty are the key issues in the vulnerability of youth across the case studies. This is hardly unexpected, considering that these issues have a direct impact on the living conditions, life-time opportunities and overall well-being of young people, and have been consistently mainstreamed into development thinking and practice, not least the 2000 Millennium Development Goals. In a majority of the surveys that were undertaken, between 60 and 70 per cent of respondents indicate one or more of education, employment and poverty as key determinants of their standard of living.

In Nigeria, for instance, the YOVEX study found strong connections between the levels of education and the rates of unemployment and underemployment among youth respondents,

especially in Kano in northern Nigeria. Among youth surveyed, Kano had the lowest levels of education and highest levels of unemployment and underemployment. Also important are the widespread realities of disrupted and poor education, low levels of vocational skills training, very high levels of unemployment and underemployment, and high incidence of poverty among young people (both male and female) across the seven case studies. Moreover, these issues tend to affect different categories of youth in varying proportions – older youth are most affected by unemployment; younger youth by education and skills training. The key challenge for the YOVEX study was to understand the context (causes, patterns and trends) of this situation, and it observes and interrogates the socio-economic variables of youth vulnerability discussed below.

### 3.2.1 The youth bulge

Across the seven case studies, the study found evidence of youth (often as defined by national standards) constituting between 30 and 70 per cent of the total populations of the countries studied. This foregrounds the claim that about one-third of the over 30 countries experiencing a youth bulge in sub-Saharan Africa are in West Africa. In Ghana, the demographic structure includes persons aged 0–20 years and those aged 0–30 years accounting for 50 per cent and 69 per cent of the country's 20 million population, respectively. In Liberia, persons aged 15–35 years account for 56 per cent of the country's 3.5 million population. In Nigeria, according to the 1991 national census, youth (people aged 18–35 years) accounted for 25 per cent (22.5 million) of the total population of 90 million, and this figure was estimated to rise to at least 30 per cent (28 million) by the year 2000 and at least 34 per cent (40 million) by 2005. The centrality of youth is reinforced by the fact that 15–24 year-olds make up about 37.4 per cent of heads of households. In Mali, youth (15–40 year-olds) constitute about 70 per cent of the country's 14 million population, and with the country's population growth rate of 3 per cent, the youth population is expected to continue growing and peak in about four years time (see Box 3.2).

Given that across the seven case studies there is strong evidence of youth accounting for at least 30 per cent of adult and total population, the extent to which this is a recent phenomenon is unclear. This is partly due to lack of reliable demographic data since independence or, as in Nigeria, the politicization of previous population censuses (which undercuts the credibility and reliability of available records). Hence, what is certain is that the nature of the youth bulge and its associated challenges differs across the case studies. In Sierra Leone, for instance, there is very little evidence to suggest that there has been any unusual surge

#### Box 3.2: Youth in Mali

- Population under 35 years: 77.1 per cent (June 2005 estimate)
- Population between ten and 35 years: 56.77 per cent (2004)
- Rural youth as a proportion of youth: 77 per cent
- Urban youth (including unemployed university graduates, informal sector workers, former parastatal employees, students and pupils) as a percentage of total urban population: 80 per cent
- Number of educational and social facilities built by the state for the benefit of youth: 72
- Number of youth facilities that are up and running: 34
- Number of youth associations: 488 (2005 estimate)

in youth demography, as youth have consistently accounted for between 33 and 38 per cent of the total population in the post-independence period.

### 3.2.2 Levels of natural resource endowments and overall economic development

The YOVEX study found logical connections between resource endowments and overall socio-economic development, especially high incidence of poverty and the vulnerability of young people. This suggests that the plight of youth conforms to the level of socio-economic impoverishment across different population categories. Three case studies exemplify this trend: Guinea, Mali and Niger have been consistently ranked among the poorest countries in the world. Guinea, for example, while it is rich in bauxite and iron ore deposits, continues to suffer from food shortages, malnutrition, and very high inflation and unemployment levels. Not unexpectedly, it is ranked 160<sup>th</sup> (of 177 countries) in the Human Development Index and 103<sup>rd</sup> (of 108 countries) in the Human Poverty Index. Mali and Niger are among the poorest countries in the world – they suffer from incessant drought, desertification and limited natural resource endowment, and are reliant on subsistence agriculture, which employs 80 per cent of the work force and which produces their major export (cotton). These are semi-arid countries with a gross national income (GNI) of USD 350 in Mali and USD 210 in Niger; and with up to 50 per cent and 63 per cent of their total population estimated to be desperately poor, respectively.

On the one hand, the high incidence of poverty in these countries is linked to the low levels of natural resource endowment or economic underdevelopment. On the other hand, this has been magnified by failed ideological regimes – the three countries (Guinea, Mali and Niger) all experienced failed post-independence authoritarian socialist, military or single-party regimes (Guinea under Sékou Touré between 1958 and 1983; Mali under Modibo Keita and successive military regimes between 1960 and 1990; and Niger since 1960). This has generated huge levels of institutional and infrastructural decay, not least the absence of pipe-borne water, irregular electricity, and highly disorganized or absent public transport systems. Accordingly, the legacies of the ideological past matter as much as the socio-economic and political history (and realities) of the countries concerned.

### 3.2.3 Poor governance and policy framework

Another important foundation of the socio-economic vulnerability of youth in the case studies is the poor governance and policy framework. Across the case studies, the adoption of structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) from the 1980s was noted to be a major index

#### **Box 3.3: Niger's socio-economic context (2004 figures)**

- Population: 13.5 million
- Population growth rate: 3.4 per cent
- Life expectancy at birth: 44.7 years
- Fertility rate: 7.7 per cent
- Mortality rate of under five year-olds per 1,000: 258.8
- GNI per capita: USD 210
- GDP: USD 3.1 billion
- Annual GDP growth rate: 0.9 per cent
- Inflation: 1.6 per cent

of the current socio-economic plight of young people. The SAPs' emphasis on macroeconomic stability and cut-backs on sensitive (youth-related) public expenditure, most especially education and public sector employment, were noted to have disproportionately affected the youth segment of the population. The increased inaccessibility to young people of education (especially at the post-secondary level) and structured vocational skills training as a result of high fees is a key factor in the claims by young people that their governments have neglected them or nobody cares about them. This was cited as a major issue in pre-war Sierra Leone, where radical reforms brought about by SAPs precipitated the collapse of education. Hence, a majority of youth grew up in the context of impoverishment, collapsed state infrastructure and services, limited access to education and socio-economic opportunities and hopelessness, all of which either stalled or postponed the transition to adulthood or made it extremely protracted. In Nigeria and Ghana, the privatization of education has increased the cost of higher education, and without any adequate scholarship schemes, most youth from poor backgrounds are unable to afford the fees. Crucially, the inherent contradictions and negative impacts of SAPs were magnified by political misrule, especially under authoritarian regimes; e.g. military rule in Nigeria (1983–99), and military single-party regimes in Sierra Leone (1967–96). The key lesson and perhaps an important challenge here are the extent to which current socio-economic policies (neoliberalism) are consistent with the role and responsibility of the state in youth development.

### 3.2.4 Civil wars, armed conflicts and political instability

Across the seven case studies, the YOVEX study observed varying levels of political disruption or its aftermath, and this was noted to be a major factor in the socio-economic plight of youth. In Liberia and Sierra Leone, over ten years of armed conflict destroyed key youth-related services/support systems (e.g. education, skills training and inter-generational relations). Moreover, large numbers of male and female youth were seriously affected as victims and perpetrators of violence. In Sierra Leone, under the 2001–02 disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programme, youth constituted a majority of the over 72,000 demobilized combatants, in addition to the over 6,000 ex-fighters below the age of 18 years (i.e. child soldiers). In Liberia, youth similarly constituted a majority of the over 103,000 demobilized combatants. Apart from this, these civil wars led to the destruction of key youth-related infrastructures. In Liberia, for example, the economy was further wrecked by a civil war that reduced per capita GDP to a paltry USD 151, increased the unemployment rate to 85 per cent, increased the poverty level from 14 per cent to 52 per cent, disrupted agricultural production and facilitated the looting of forest resources. The decade of armed conflict also witnessed the destruction of key seaport facilities, the disruption and destruction of educational facilities (e.g. the looting of the library of the University of Liberia), the destruction of 95 per cent of health centres, and a drop in the number of qualified doctors from 400 in the late 1980s to only 34 at the end of the conflict, while eroding the capacity of the state to maintain or increase the 6 per cent of the total road network (10,600 km) that is paved.

Also, in countries like Nigeria, Ghana, Mali and Niger that did not experience civil war,<sup>3</sup> there are substantial levels of internal political volatility and inter-group clashes as exemplified by ethno-religious/political crises in Nigeria (in the Niger Delta and northern Nigeria) and northern Ghana (Yendi and Bawku), and the Tuareg insurrection in the northern regions of Mali and Niger. In these countries, youth have been drawn into armed conflict by a variety of factors (see sections 3.2.1–3.2.5), or suffer considerable deprivation in the aftermath of armed conflict (the plight of young people in post-war Sierra Leone and Liberia), or experience heightened states of fear and insecurity as a result of ongoing insurrection (youth being targeted by security forces or being seen as synonymous with militancy and violence, e.g. in Nigeria). The key issue here is the different, yet broadly similar, impacts of armed conflict and political disruptions on young people in the case studies. While DDR programmes become a potential window of intervention for policy and practice in post-conflict settings, there is also a need to pay important attention to young people involved in low-intensity conflicts such as those mentioned above.

### 3.2.5 Urbanization and rural-urban migration

Another major undercurrent of the socio-economic vulnerability of youth, especially those in urban centres, across the case studies is the accelerated intensity of urbanization and the huge rural–urban migration taking place among young people. In countries like Mali, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Niger, post-Cold War socio-political changes and the search for alternatives forms of livelihoods (i.e. other than subsistence agriculture) have fuelled demographic movements. In the post-conflict societies of Liberia and Sierra Leone, wartime population movements (internal displacement, the dislocation of families and communities, and membership of armed groups) brought many youth to urban centres such as cities and provincial capitals, and their experience of urban lifestyles, the trappings of ‘modernity’ and the services available there (however limited) have made repatriation or return to local (rural) communities less possible thereafter. In post-war Liberia, the population of Monrovia has surged to over 1.5 million (up from 500,000 in the pre-war years), and there has been an estimated 70 per cent increase in Monrovia’s youth population.

Similarly, Freetown has become densely populated in the post-war period, as indexed by the ongoing housing crisis (resulting in overcrowding, squalor and homelessness), and increases in the number of ‘street-pikin’ (street youth) and commercial sex workers. The centripetal pull towards urban centres in post-war societies has been fuelled by the increased international presence in the form of multilateral peacekeeping forces, media agencies, and local and international NGOs. Non-post-conflict contexts like Mali and Niger are also experiencing huge levels of rural–urban migration among youth. In Mali, the migration rate of 6.26 per 1,000 population is rapidly making the capital, Bamako, one of the fastest growing cities in Africa. An added dimension is the way in which the increasing concentration of young rural migrants in urban centres has thinned out socio-economic opportunities there,

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3 Nigeria’s civil war took place in the 1970s, so was not considered to be relevant for this study.



thus fuelling transborder migration, assisted by the booming cross-border trade in many West African countries.

### 3.3 Issues in youth exclusion

The YOVEX study found varied levels of youth involvement in decision-making across the seven case studies. Regarding youth involvement in the political process, the research found that, historically, young people have been central to political stability and change across the case studies. On the one hand, authoritarian regimes in Guinea, Niger and Mali created and mobilized youth (as members of youth militias or youth wings of single-party regimes) to counteract perceived or real threats from the urban bourgeoisie class. On the other hand, youth either spearheaded or were part of civil society coalitions that achieved political transformation through the dismantling of repressive regimes, e.g. in displacing military regimes in post-1991 Mali and resisting military rulers in post-1990 Nigeria. However, the study found two important undercurrents of youth political exclusion across the seven case studies, which are discussed below.

#### 3.3.1 The nature of politics and electoral systems

The YOVEX study observed marked differences in the level of youth participation, trust and confidence in formal politics and decision-making processes. The YOVEX survey, for instance, found that young people in post-conflict societies (Liberia and Sierra Leone) and countries that seemed to be early starters in genuine political transition from authoritarian rule (Mali and Ghana) displayed more impressive levels of trust and interest in voting than those in countries seemingly experiencing protracted political transitions (Nigeria, Niger and Guinea). The case of post-conflict societies is especially important here, as the upsurge in international policy engagement in and the focussing of the media spotlight on these countries appeared to free up the political space. A marked indicator of this is the over 70 per cent of youth respondents who claimed to have voted in previous elections, or claimed to be interested in voting in the next elections, or expressed belief in voting as a way of influencing public policy through regime change.

Conversely, in countries like Nigeria and Guinea, the YOVEX study observed great levels of political apathy among youth. This can be traced to a lack of belief in the political and electoral systems. The limited trust and participation of youth in formal politics appear to correlate progressively with the informal (and sometimes illegal and extra-judicial) involvement of young people in politics through undefined roles as political party thugs, members of youth wings, party enforcers, etc. In Nigeria, for instance, a category of youth known as 'area' boys and girls have become notorious for their involvement in election-related offences, such as disrupting campaigns, defacing posters, intimidating opponents, stealing ballot boxes and papers, etc. Not unexpectedly, the YOVEX study found higher levels of political thuggery among countries where youth are less enthusiastic about formal politics. This does not make countries with higher levels of youth confidence in formal politics immune from political violence or thuggery; however, it does seem that this occurs at much lower levels.

### 3.3.2 Structural limitations

In spite of the differences discussed above, the YOVEX study observed that virtually all seven case studies are denominated by the acute under-representation or inactive participation of youth in formal decision-making institutions and processes (other than voting). Although most of the case studies have formally recognized national youth councils, these are often advisory bodies, are sometimes politicized, or rarely represent the interest of mainstream youth on account of being tied to the apron strings of those in power. A survey of the proportion of people defined under national policies as youth among legislators, ministers and cabinet members across the cases studies reveals either the complete absence of young people or their inconsequential presence (i.e. they account for under 3 per cent of legislators).

In Nigeria, for instance, there is no single member of Senate (the upper legislative chamber at the national level) who is under 35 years of age, and the average structure of senators in the period 2003–07 shows that people aged 45–55 years form the core, making up 44 per cent of the 109-member chamber, followed by those age 56 years and above (36 per cent), and those between 36 and 40 years (17.2 per cent). There also appears to be an ageing trend in the Senate, with the share of those aged 56 years and over increasing from 25 per cent in 1999 to 36.6 per cent in 2005, and the share of those aged 46–55 years decreasing from 49 per cent in 1999 to 44 per cent in 2005. Also, in the national House of Representatives, of the total of 360 members, only five are under 35 years of age (all male), and people aged 41–51 years form the core (59 per cent), followed by those under 40 years of age at 23 per cent (but these are mostly aged 35–40 years), and those 52 years and above (15 per cent). The average age in the House of Representative is 45 years. The national pattern is also reflected at the regional level, where the low representation of youth, even using an upper age limit of 30 years, is evident. In Lagos, of the total 40 state lawmakers, only one is under the age of 35 years, while another seven are between 36 and 40 years. In Rivers State in the Niger Delta, of the 32-member Legislative Assembly, only four are between 18 and 35 years, while seven are aged 36–40 years. Even in post-conflict Sierra Leone and its supposedly more open political system, there was only one lawmaker from among the youth up to 2007, and about ten after the September 2007 elections.

The limited participation and representation of youth in decision-making institutions and processes reveal serious structural and systemic contradictions. In a majority of the case studies, there are varying levels of age-based restrictions on political aspiration and participation in decision-making processes (other than a common voting age of 18 years). In post-war Sierra Leone, 18 is the voting age, while the ages of 21 and 40 mark eligibility for contesting parliamentary seats and the presidency, respectively. In Nigeria, 30 marks eligibility for parliamentary seats at the state and national levels, while 35 is the minimum age of eligibility to stand for the Senate, and 40 for the presidency.

The current use of an age criterion to control access to decision-making appears to underline the societal (adult) perception of youth as unruly, irresponsible or incapable; confirms the existence of a patriarchy and gerontocracy that give authority to males and adults/elders, respectively; and brings out the nature of inter-generational power relations in the post-colonial period. In Nigeria, for instance, the current state of affairs reflects a deterioration



in youth participation over time, given that in 1993, 52.4 per cent of members of the House of Representatives were between 30 and 40 years of age, while this figure dropped to 46 per cent in 1999 and 23 per cent in 2005. In a majority of cases, these age-based criteria were rarely present in the immediate post-independence period, thus foregrounding the changes in inter-generational power relations. Even where such age criteria still permit the possibility of the election of youth and their participation in decision-making processes, the nature of politics (money-driven, corrupt, subject to manipulation, etc.) and the socio-economic plight of the majority of youth rarely allow any significant involvement (as exemplified in post-war Sierra Leone). Worse still, female youth are more affected; for instance, of the ten current lawmakers from among the youth in Sierra Leone, only three are females, while there are none among the comparable group of lawmakers in Nigeria.

## What are governments doing?

### 4.1 Introduction

It is a simplistic assumption that the socio-economic vulnerability and political exclusion of youth are conditioned by poverty, state collapse and limited capacity, or that governments are necessarily helpless or powerless. National youth policies have a powerful role to play and many states have solid histories of work with young people. However, the YOVEX study found current youth policies across the region to be problematic in their orientation and implementation. By highlighting instances of deficit, the study seeks to show how existing state-led policies can be reviewed and made more relevant and effective.

#### Box 4.1: Chapter summary

Levels of socio-economic development limit the resources available to and the capacity of states to meet the needs of young people; however, the resources and capacity that are available are also not fully utilized. This is due to poor policy frameworks and implementation, the low prioritization of youth issues, under-funding, non-participatory approaches, and a lack of partnerships with non-state actors. The absence of equal opportunities agendas and the politicization and capture of youth services and resources also figure prominently. There are additional problems of biases towards urban over rural young people, employment over education and skills training, and wage labour over entrepreneurial development. Still, the presence of national youth policies represents a valuable entry and take-off point for youth development initiatives. Moreover, smaller, focused initiatives concerned with particular categories of young people appear as workable strategies. The chapter ends with a summary of recommendations reflecting key points.

### 4.2 National policy frameworks and existing initiatives: an overview

National youth policies serve as the dominant normative framework across the case studies. National policies define youth, identify target populations, articulate the obligations of government towards youth, prioritize areas of intervention, draw up sectional plans and maintain institutional arrangements.

Broadly, they reflect regional understandings of youth-hood as a secondary position in society, with the state as adult and donor, and young people – despite their burgeoning numerical majority – as a social sub-group requiring control, leadership, opportunities for work, and moral and social conditioning in support of a national identity in the making.

Against this are urgent, pressing preoccupations at the national and regional levels with the relationship between young people and (the lack of) employment, and young people and violence. This nexus of issues gives rise to sprawling, ambitious, paternalistic agendas (cf. Box 4.2). Within this paradigm, young people in all their immense diversity are marginally positioned as dysfunctional, disenfranchised recipients of state aid delivered top-down as

an adjunct to a supposed functioning normality elsewhere. For their part, youth policies and state-sponsored activities flowing from them work within existing unofficial patterns of privilege and influence, rather than in opposition to them. The result in some cases is a self-sustaining cycle of mistrust: youth are always wanting; there is never enough money, but what there is, is subject to capture and mismanagement; the danger of social breakdown is ever present; the situation is one of lose-lose; and young people and state institutions view each other with profound scepticism.

Youth policies and their implementation vary widely in type, sophistication, resourcing and effectiveness across the region. Nigeria, Ghana and Mali have extensively developed youth policies and a coherent plan for institutional mechanisms. Nigeria, for example, now has three editions of its youth policy – the first drawn up in 1983, the second in 1989 and current version in 2001. Ghana and Mali developed national youth policies in 1999 and 2003, respectively. However, Liberia and Sierra Leone only recently developed a youth policy (in the post-2003 period). The recent attempt by post-war Liberia and Sierra Leone at youth policy development underscores their wartime experiences of youth involvement in armed conflict and indicates that these states understand youth policies as a peace-building imperative. Guinea's most recent youth policy in its liberal-democratic history – after many years of systematic youth work on the Soviet model under Sékou Touré – was never funded beyond the draft stage and is now undergoing review.

This is not to say that solid effort, good ideas and good work – often carried out against huge odds – characterize well-targeted, intelligent and sincere attempts to make a difference to the lives of young Africans in the region. Despite the different levels in youth policy development, and however imperfect and underdeveloped they are, national policies and infrastructures provide valuable templates and entry points for national and international actors focusing on youth development.

In Guinea, for instance, state-led youth initiatives are historically organized around the *maisons des jeunes* (district youth houses) run by regional youth directors with a mission to 'transform youth into agents of development'. *Maisons des jeunes* are intended to serve as avenues through which youth learn about democracy, citizenship and good governance, and provide support to self-starting youth associations. Although starved of funds, these local youth houses remain staffed by committed locals dedicated to working with local groups engaged in self-start economic activities. A remnant of the socialist regime, this chronically run-down type of infrastructure still offers huge potential for locally sensitive support of all kinds.

#### **Box 4.2: The mission statement of Nigeria's National Youth Policy**

The mission of the policy is to build a youth with a sense of hope, self-confidence, imagination, creativity and pride in the nation's heritage; youth who represent hope in the future of Nigeria; youth who are disciplined, well-focused, law abiding and good citizens; youth full of the spirit of entrepreneurship, self-reliance, mutual cooperation, understanding and respect; . . . youth who imbibe the culture of democracy and good governance; . . . and youth committed to the ideal of national unity and development as enshrined in the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.'

**Source:** 2001 National Youth Policy

Other state policies cover an impressive, well-intended range of issues. In Nigeria, the youth policy lists priority areas as unemployment and under-employment, poor education, the breakdown of family values and indiscipline, the non-availability of sports and recreational facilities, moral decadence, cultism, and religious fanaticism. The target groups include young people in secondary and post-secondary educational institutions; out-of-school, unemployed and under-employed youth; youth involved in crime; and female adolescents (see Box 4.3, below). In Sierra Leone, the youth policy, apart from defining youth, sets out the goals and priorities of government on job creation, skills training, information and sensitization, and youth participation; presents the country's youth profile (demography); and lays down the rights and responsibilities of youth, the state, families/parents and the private sector. Governmental priorities include specific initiatives such as the Youth Employment Scheme (YES) and the launch of a state-sponsored micro-credit programme for youth in the post-conflict period.

### 4.2.1 National policies and employment

There is widespread emphasis by national governments on youth unemployment, as evidenced by the implementation of YESs in most of the case studies. In the Anglophone countries of Nigeria, Ghana and Sierra Leone, the YESs appear to be part of the Commonwealth Action Plan on youth. Possibly, this reflects the tendency of state-led programming and priorities on youth to be influenced by the funding priorities and agenda of donor agencies and governments.

In Sierra Leone, the Sierra Leone People's Party government launched the national YES in 2006/07 with support from the UN. With a budget of USD 16.7 million, the scheme planned to employ 4,800 youth in public works activities, 16,000 youth in agricultural and food production, and 5,000 youth in entrepreneurial and self-employment activities. The overarching objective of the scheme was to make youth employment a central theme in national development by providing immediate employment opportunities for unemployed youth. Such opportunities were expected to aid in the cultivation of a skilled, confident and employable youth population that could contribute to community and national development. However, the scheme lasted for barely six months, and was discontinued just before the 2007 elections because of inadequate funding.

In Mali in 2003, following Moussa Traore's declaration of his intention to make youth issues the key focus of his administration, the regime created the youth employment agency Agence pour la Promotion de l'Emploi des Jeunes (APEJ) under the Programme Emploi Jeunes: Document Cadre (2003–08) specifically to tackle youth unemployment, and in 2005 developed the PNPJ as a grand youth development/empowerment strategy in the areas of leisure, culture and education, social vulnerability, insertion, communication, etc.

Overall, there is a common pattern of youth employment initiatives across the case studies with most national governments attempting sector-specific initiatives focused on skills training, education and volunteering (see Box 4.4, below). In Nigeria and Ghana, for example, programmes like the national youth service schemes (set up since the 1970s) and youth volunteer and internship programmes are targeted at higher education graduates. Typically of the region, youth issues in both countries have been integrated into broad socio-

economic policies and programmes such as poverty reduction and eradication strategies, plans for dedicated youth development funds, skills training, and employment placement initiatives (most especially in Ghana).

Nigeria also launched its YES under the National Poverty Eradication Programme and the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy.

In Guinea, the National Programme of Youth Volunteers (for youth aged 22–35 years) was designed to provide youth with work experience and, through postings to other parts of Guinea, to enable them to explore the other regions of the country. Through this scheme, the youth ministry hopes that more youth will have the opportunity to gain work experience.

Local one-off initiatives often work best. During the study, it appeared that many sector-specific programmes targeted at specific categories of young people represented promising approaches to youth support if they were given adequate levels of resourcing, efficiency and accessibility (see Box 4.4, below).

#### **Box 4.3: The Lagos Women Development Centre**

The centre was created in 1998 by the government of Lagos State as a poverty alleviation project designed initially to cater for young women. But over the past two years, the centre has had to cater for young males as well. It provides vocational skills training in tailoring, embroidery, soap making, typesetting, computer training, tie-dyeing, hair-dressing, interior decoration, party decorating and baking. It trains between 2,000 and 2,500 people every year in a broad range of vocational skills. After apprenticeship, the centre assists youth to start up their own businesses initially through special grants, but now through a micro-credit scheme financed by the Lagos State government. Awareness of the centre's programme has grown among young people over the years, as indicated by the increasingly large volumes of applications for training it receives annually.

### **4.2.2 National policies and conflict**

Youth policy and youth development have become key peace-building and conflict prevention issues in both post-conflict and non-post-conflict societies. Youth policies have been developed in post-conflict Liberia and Sierra Leone, while the link between youth and conflict has become a major policy agenda item in Mali.

In Sierra Leone, the Technical and Vocational Educational Training programme was initiated to develop young artisans as entrepreneurs able to make significant contributions to local communities. Programmes offered by NGOs and community-based organizations (CBOs) offering training in basic masonry, plumbing, carpentry, hairdressing, barbering, gara tie-dyeing and soap-making skills are open to both illiterate and literate youths who have some primary and secondary education. YOVEX interviewees in Lumley noted that two vocational institutes in their area 'have made a significant impact in the Lumley-Juba area by training secondary school dropouts in hairdressing, barbering, carpentry, gara tie-dyeing, and soap making. Many of the graduates have now opened small enterprises in the area.'

In the conflict-prone Niger Delta region of Nigeria, the Bayelsa State government introduced the Second Chance Programme as a peace-building initiative, designed primarily to stem the rising tide of militancy and violence among youth (see Box 4.4).

ECOWAS too acknowledges the importance of young people in its emerging conflict prevention architecture under the ECPF and its 2008 Youth Policy. The Youth Policy called

for the development of a regional youth volunteer programme and an ECOWAS youth empowerment (skills training) programme, and the organization of regional youth games. It is accepted that both regional and national youth policies – where well developed and effective – provide key development and security tools (especially when accompanied by the clear identification of priority areas and target groups, and coherent goal setting) and a major entry point for interventions by international actors and agencies in West Africa.

### 4.3 Limitations and weaknesses of existing state-led initiatives

Accurately measuring the outputs, impacts and outcomes of national policies is difficult, given the lack of reliable data and evaluation and monitoring procedures, but the YOVEX study found much qualitative evidence suggesting that the impact of state-led policies and programmes on the material and emotional plight of young people across the region is limited.

In the institutional profiling and ranking exercises undertaken across the seven case studies, a large majority of youth respondents expressed lack of trust in the readiness of government and its agencies (relative to high levels of confidence in civil society organizations – CSOs) to address their needs or offer genuine assistance. They accused governments of ineptitude and neglect. Reasons for this include poor policy-making based on inadequate data, state incapacity and inadequate resources, and a low priority given to youth development outside of tardy and sporadic provision around the problem areas of unemployment and violence.

#### 4.3.1 Poor policy framework and implementation inadequacies

The YOVEX study found poor policy and implementation frameworks in many cases where policy was scanty and lacking in detail (Sierra Leone), inaccessible or non-existent (Guinea and Niger), or still in draft form (Liberia). The Sierra Leonean policy, for example, is desperately thin in specifics (covering only nine pages), contents itself with broad general ideas, and fails to formulate strategy (e.g. it fails to list former young fighters and child soldiers as

#### Box 4.4: Bayelsa State Second Chance Programme

The Bayelsa State Second Chance Programme was initiated by the state government in 2007 to grant a 'second opportunity' to youth in the state to re-order their lives through a new deal called 'Triple E' (engagement, education and employment). The programme, which is being implemented under the Ministry of Youth's Department of Conflict Resolution and Employment Generation between 2007 and 2010, seeks to create 10,000 jobs through training in ICT, seamanship, aviation (pilot training), and local content capacity development in oil exploitation and investment clubbing. The programme also seeks to establish local content capacity development centres in collaboration with the UN Development Programme. It intends to establish a centre for peace and arbitration at Oloibiri, the place where oil was first discovered in commercial quantities in the Niger Delta. The programme is based on the premise that only after youth forfeit these opportunities presented to them and, instead, threaten the security of the state will the government then be left with the option of enforcing the law. As laudable as the programme seems, it is not free of challenges. For instance, there are concerns that women are not currently taking full advantage of the various programmes on offer.



comprising a target group in post-war Sierra Leone). Co-ordination/implementation strategies in Sierra Leone and elsewhere are commonly held to have proved inadequate or unworkable. Across the case studies, a majority of youth respondents were either not aware of the youth policy, or had only very vague knowledge of its key provisions. Most young people were simply not being reached.

### 4.3.2 Under-funding and lack of state capacity

The YOVEX study also found cross-cutting evidence linking the limited effectiveness of state-led youth initiatives to consistent under-funding by national governments. In post-war Sierra Leone, for instance, most state-led youth initiatives continue to have minimal impact as a result of inconsistent funding, not least the abrupt suspension of the Youth Employment Scheme on the eve of the 2007 elections on account of inadequate funding by donor governments and agencies. In Guinea, a majority of listed programmes under the youth policy have either been shelved or scaled back because of limited funds. Only 20 per cent of *maisons des jeunes* have benefitted from state-sponsored training and capacity-building sessions intended for their youth leaders. The youth ministry staff strength, in the context of economic reform, has been reduced from 200 to ten and its budget is subject to annual cuts. Also, the planned national programme of youth volunteers designed to provide work experience preparatory to paid employment is yet to be implemented because of funding delays.

Rather than being state-funded, we found that most existing youth initiatives, including health and disease-prevention programmes, were externally planned and funded. Clearly, these externally funded programmes remain important and relevant, but they rarely reflect local/national priorities or attempts at co-ordinated efforts within national policy guidelines. The secretary-general of the youth ministry in Guinea identified mining skills training as a national priority:

*the national lack of vocational training had become a major concern governing the direction of youth policy. The ministry is concerned with skills deficiency following the discovery that it is difficult for mining companies such as Rio-Tinto to employ Guinea's youth because there is no adequate skilled labour available.<sup>4</sup>*

However, we found no external agencies or programmes with this specific agenda. The study found the disconnects — if not mutual suspicion — among state, non-state, and private initiatives and priorities a common feature of all the case studies.

### 4.3.3 Lack of legislation-led programming

Since the approval in 2006 of the African Youth Charter by the AU, only 29 of 53 AU member states (55 per cent) have signed up, of which only six have proceeded to ratification.<sup>5</sup>

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4 In an interview with the research team, January 2008.

5 This information is correct as at 3 September 2008.

In West Africa and among the seven case studies, only two countries, Mali and Niger, have ratified the AYC. The charter is still desperately short of the 15 ratifications needed to trigger its legal operation. Despite the youth bulge, national youth policies, and official pronouncements regarding the centrality of young people in development and security, particularly in post-conflict societies, most countries in West Africa, including Ghana, Guinea, Liberia, Nigeria and Sierra Leone, have either not signed or not ratified the AYC. As a result, youth policies and programmes remain executive decisions as opposed to parliamentary legislation, open to manipulation, arbitrary change or cancellation by incumbents of power.

The failure to pass the Youth Development Act in Nigeria and the draft Youth Policy in Liberia underlines this. Across the region, under-funded or malfunctioning projects often reflect only the shifting personal priorities of power elites attempting to sustain or advance their position. Unaccountable slowdowns and stoppages in funding afflict many initiatives (see Box 4.5) In Nigeria for instance, the inaugural National Youth Development Centre conceived and commenced in the 1980s had not yet become functional as of May 2008 (see Box 4.6).

In Nigeria, over 90 per cent of planned projects and programmes – like the passing of the 2001 Youth Development Act and the setting up of the State Youth Development Fund – were yet to be implemented in 2008 when a review of the 2001 National Youth Policy commenced. Plans for the formation of a national youth development council, enabling legislation to mandate the allocation of at least 10 per cent of the national

#### **Box 4.5: National Poverty Eradication Programme (NAPEP) and the Youth Employment Scheme**

The NAPEP was introduced by the administration of former President Obasanjo at the return of the country to civilian rule in 1999 to address the growing problem of poverty in Nigeria. The compelling need to eradicate poverty and the suffering that it continued to cause later precipitated its restructuring and sub-division into five schemes, with one of the schemes being the YES. YES activities alone gulped NGN 35 billion (USD 267.2 million) in 2000 and 2001. But the scheme, especially its funding, was scaled back from 2002 by the government without any explanation.

#### **Box 4.6: Nigeria's national youth development centres**

The idea of national youth development centres was conceived during the mid- to late 1980s as a result of youth riots and civil unrest at that time. Anecdotal evidence suggests that work was started on various centres, but never completed. The National Youth Development Centre in Owode-Egba, Ogun State, was eventually officially commissioned on 6 September 2007, after the Obasanjo administration decided to complete this project, while anecdotal evidence suggests that other centres were never completed. The on-site hostels can cater for 300 male and 300 female students, plus some 30 staff. The aim is to train youth in activities like tyre changing, car repairs, tailoring, barbering, hairdressing, etc. The centre was intended to train different categories of young people: street youth, school youth, area boys or the unemployed. Courses would last for one week, three weeks, 12 weeks or three months. However, a visit to the Owode-Egba centre revealed that training has yet to take place pending the national budget's passage through parliament. The facilities on site are grossly inadequate, unused and unusable, poorly staffed, and visibly deserted. Moreover, most youth surveyed claimed not to be aware of the centre or what it offers. From interviews with officials of government and non-governmental youth agencies, there appears to be very little collaboration with and involvement of non-state institutions in the conception and operation of the centre.



budget to youth development, and the creation of youth employment and counselling offices in each local government area had also not been implemented. Nigeria cannot be compared to a majority of the case studies in terms of its resources base, and this therefore can only reflect the low ranking awarded youth issues in regime priorities.

As a further example, the flagship Nigerian Youth Service Scheme has been scaled down since its inception in the 1970s through the introduction of new rules that limit the number of youth participants and beneficiaries (e.g. reducing the cut-off age for participation from 35 to 30 years).

#### 4.3.4 Official rhetoric, politicization and capture of youth initiatives

The YOVEX study observed that, rather than being legislative priorities, most government-led initiatives were watered-down versions of public pronouncements, often marked by intense politicization by incumbents of power. While political elites and national governments continually reiterated the critical roles of youth in development and security in speeches and official pronouncements, in practice, youth and youth issues tend to be exploited as avenues for corrupt enrichment, the distribution and reward of political loyalty (as opposed to dealing with the genuine needs of youth), and a political resource to be mobilized at election time.

The platitudinous declarations and aspirations of most national governments on youth issues are matched by the poor performances and ineffectiveness of most state-led youth programmes across the case studies. Youth initiatives occupy a domain of hopeless inadequacy characterized by inadequate funding, official rhetoric, broken assurances and political calculations. Across the seven case studies, youth respondents consistently cite 'connections' – the complex web of informal relationships, referrals and recommendations constructed around ethnic, religious, geographical, political and kinship ties – as a necessary precondition for accessing government-led youth programmes. To this extent, most youth beneficiaries of government programmes tend to be members of the ruling political parties, or recommended by political (ethnic, religious or customary) elites, or youth targeted in periods leading to elections.

#### 4.3.5 Official bias towards educated and urban youth

We found that most functional youth initiatives and operational aspects of national youth policies were focused on educated and urban youth.

In Mali, the neglect of young people – to the extent of affecting entire rural populations in the north – is at the root of the Tuareg uprising, and most respondents from northern Mali spoke of a desperate lack of governmental presence and resources in the region. Key issues in the rebellion are charges of exclusion; discrimination; and the lack of opportunities, resources and infrastructures in the north. One example is the funding of small businesses set up by young people and access to government-insured micro-finance schemes that are found in a number in cities like Bamako, but are non-existent in northern Mali. Youth from northern Mali describe experiencing considerable discrimination and many difficulties in Bamako (on account of their inability to speak Bambara, the lingua of the capital) in their

attempts to access state services aimed at youth. In Mali still, the flagship youth initiative with the highest level of government funding, the APEJ, is dedicated to providing internships and employment opportunities only for educated youth.

Similarly, in Nigeria and Ghana, the most popular and best funded government youth programmes have been the national youth schemes, and youth volunteer and internship programmes, all of which are reserved for educated youth; this despite the inclusion of skills training for rural and uneducated youth in the respective national youth policies.

#### 4.3.6 Employment prioritized over education and skills training

The YOVEX study found strong evidence to suggest that a majority of state-led youth programmes are disproportionately focused on employment, without corresponding attention and resources focused on education and skills training.

In most cases, education, especially at post-secondary level, remains expensive or inaccessible to most youth in the case studies. In Sierra Leone, despite the policy of providing free education (up to secondary school), the YOVEX study found problems reported at various levels of education, not least the introduction of ancillary fees and charges by schools, overcrowding and poor infrastructure, and the poor remuneration and low morale of teachers. All this has made ‘after-school’ classes organized by the same government-employed teachers (to augment their income) very widespread and popular in Sierra Leone.

The alternative TVET programme offering vocational training suffers from the failure of government to positively promote it as a viable alternative to university education, leaving it vulnerable to negative perceptions. Also, young people seeking vocational training have sometimes been fleeced by unscrupulous entrepreneurs, NGOs and CBOs who take their money for programmes of dubious quality. TVET programme activities are supervised by the Ministry of Education to ensure quality control and the accreditation of their programmes, but the regulation of such programmes remains lax, even though there is an association of proprietors. Two young women interviewees recalled how they had spent four years and thousands of leones paying for an unrecognized nursing programme from an unaccredited institution. Efforts by these women to continue their training at the National School of Nursing were thwarted by their lack of the requisite patronage and resources to bribe their way in.

Many TVET graduates become disappointed with their training and switch to alternative pursuits. Skills training offered to former war combatants under the DDR programme in 2001–02 foundered when many of the ‘trained’ ex-combatants sold their tools and found other means of generating cash. Only a third actually used their skills to generate regular income. The inappropriateness of training to market needs is often a problem. Many of the subsequent training programmes, especially those offered by CBOs and NGOs, have proved to be too basic to provide marketable skills.

Across the case studies, post-secondary education following macroeconomic adjustments and economic reform (privatization) remains extremely expensive and inaccessible to rural youth and young people from poorer backgrounds. In many cases, requisite tuition levels were increased following the adoption of SAPs without corresponding scholarship and bursary schemes to cater for the needs of youth from poor backgrounds.

University education remains extremely costly. There is also the problem of space: in Nigeria less than 20 per cent of secondary school leavers are admitted each year into post-secondary institutions because of limited places. This has generated a huge backlog over the years.

The scarcity and cost of higher education have even greater impacts on young women whose parents do not place a high value on female education. It is commonplace for female youth to be pressured into early marriages, commercial sex work or becoming traders as alternatives to education and skills training.

### 4.3.7 Wage labour prioritized over entrepreneurial development

Given the obsession with unemployment, the approach to youth employment is still heavily biased towards employed/wage labour and very thin on self-employment and entrepreneurial development, despite the huge volume of self-start economic activities under way in the informal and formal economies.

Across the case studies, despite official rhetoric and policy pronouncements, data on entrepreneurial activity was almost impossible to come by and the YOVEX study found little evidence of widespread investment or research into micro-credit schemes provided by government to develop enterprise. In post-war Sierra Leone and Liberia, as well as Mali and Guinea, most young people are completely without access to such credit.

In Sierra Leone, university graduates trying to start small or medium-sized enterprises or youth already engaged in business (e.g. brokerage, currency exchange, hawking and petty trading) in the informal sector find it very difficult to secure loans from commercial banks or micro-credit organizations. Young people often have little knowledge of credit systems, and most banks do not view youth, especially those without bank accounts, as creditworthy customers. Banks, in the context of state ineptitude and policy inadequacies, have not been committed, creative or bold enough to design strategies, services or products targeted at various categories of youth.

Similarly, state-sponsored micro-credit organizations are regarded as demanding and inflexible, not least their preconditions of collateral and sureties that are difficult for struggling young people to produce – especially women – while their repayment time of three months is regarded as too short.

Government initiatives tend not to relate to trends on the ground. Across the region, but particularly in Nigeria, the booming home video market (so-called 'Nollywood'), hip-pop music and other emergent cultural industries attract thousands of young people and feed worldwide markets. However, these developments are marked by the near absence of government interest in this sector or the provision of assistance (financial and technical), training or educational courses to support the industry or those young people ready to enter it.

### 4.3.8 Lack of CSO and private sector partnership or involvement

YOVEX found most government-led initiatives and youth policies to be thin on partnerships with CSOs, NGOs and the private sector. Most national youth policies express the desirability of state partnerships with the private sector and CSOs, but the real picture is markedly dif-

ferent, as different agencies and institutions run parallel, are unco-ordinated, and sometimes offer competing and duplicating youth initiatives. Data is not shared or built upon in any systematic way, policy is not co-ordinated, and CSO and NGO initiatives are inadequately regulated and monitored.

The lack of any state–private sector partnership is reflected in employment preconditions by private sector bodies that perpetuate patterns of advantage and exclusion. Across the case studies, young respondents, especially those with education or skills training, identified discriminatory practices associated with the demand for experience before employment and/or social or family connections as major obstacles to employment.

Despite this, CSOs, NGOs and the private sector often share views on ways to ameliorate patterns of poverty and widen economic infrastructures. As organizations, they enjoy greater reach and focus than state agencies, and there is no doubt that huge potential for co-working is currently being wasted. The YOVEX study identified the need for broad stakeholder coalitions in individual countries and across West Africa (especially among CSOs) to co-ordinate strategies, share information and expertise, and improve the outputs and impacts of youth development projects.

#### 4.3.9 Loss of trust and confidence in state programmes

Many young people simply do not trust government initiatives. In surveys across the seven case studies, youth respondents identified the government as one of the institutions least capable of providing assistance to youth.

In most cases, youth identified non-state agencies and CSOs, especially religious bodies, NGOs and aid agencies, as youth-friendly and helpful institutions. In Guinea, youth trusted different institutions in different locations, with NGOs frequently highly regarded. For example, in forest regions, the American Refugee Council was often the ‘winner’ of the institutional analysis exercise. The police and government agencies scored lowest.

The Ghana study found some enthusiasm for governmental programmes, but also extremely high levels of mistrust of and anger towards the state among youth. The low level of confidence in state-sponsored programmes is linked to the lack of adequate youth involvement in government programmes, with youth highlighting the lack of voice such programmes afforded them (see Table 4.1).

**Table 4.1** Organizations that youth think help them most in Ghana

| Organization        | Frequency  | %            |
|---------------------|------------|--------------|
| Church/mosque       | 160        | 36.6         |
| NGOs                | 157        | 35.9         |
| Government entities | 86         | 19.7         |
| Keep-fit clubs      | 16         | 3.7          |
| No response         | 18         | 4.1          |
| <b>Total</b>        | <b>437</b> | <b>100.0</b> |

Source: Ghana YOVEX survey

In Mali, virtually no-one chose 'social services' as an influence or provider of assistance to youth, and most respondents indicated CSOs in this regard, including religious bodies and NGOs. In fact, from focus group sessions and in-depth interviews, an overwhelming number of respondents expressed frustration at the APEJ and the feeling of anger that results from the nepotism associated with the agency. Interviewed youth expressed the view that only those with connections to political parties, political elites and people in government tend to benefit from APEJ and other government youth initiatives.

### 4.3.10 Ignoring exclusion

Another weakness of state-led youth initiative across the case studies is the lack of attempts to include young people in decision-making institutions and mainstream political processes. Although virtually all the national policies assert the desire to include young people in formal politics and decision-making processes, the reality is different. Generally, structural rules and eligibility criteria working against youthful membership of state institutions remain unchanged (and are sometimes strengthened), and youth continue to be positioned as passive recipients of government assistance.

In most cases, the design and implementation of state-led programmes and policies for youth follow a top-down, non-participatory procedure where political elites, adults and elders determine programme contents and funding priorities. The exclusion of young people in this way is paradigmatic: the limited participation of young people in decision-making is rarely viewed as an issue in addressing the socio-economic, material and emotional plight of young people in West Africa.

Provision for youth involvement in decision-making other than voting in elections usually centres on national youth councils, which are supposedly advisory bodies in matters concerning young people. In certain cases (e.g. Sierra Leone), there are provisions for youth councils at various levels (district, provincial and national). The reality across the case studies suggests that these bodies are deeply politicized as informal youth wings of ruling coalitions or avenues for political patronage. Moreover, they remain advisory, lacking any constitutional status that would permit them to influence public policy choices. This underscores the power context of inter-generational relationship, especially the politics of age, as well as the strong influence of patriarchy and gerontocracy. As we discuss below, this has implications for the involvement of youth in political thuggery and violence as alternative channels for participation, and for access to public office holders and the levers of public policy.

## 4.4 Conclusions and recommendations

Youth policies and initiatives tend to be relegated as disposable, under-funded initiatives subject to cancellation or patronage according to political interest.

**Recommendation:** *There is an urgent need to prioritize policy and its funding, and to treat it as legislation-led development aimed at furthering the AU's AYC, with linkage to the ECOWAS Youth Policy and the ECPF.*

Current policies perpetuate an irrelevant model of top-down donorship to young people positioned as a recipient underclass.

**Recommendation:** *Effort should be made to promote participation by young people in the prioritizing and design of support policies aimed at enabling them to further themselves and their communities.*

Current policies perpetuate the capture of resources and influence by establishing patterns of privilege and advantage.

**Recommendation:** *Effort should be directed towards consciously promoting equal opportunities for young people pursuing open access opportunities by linking young people to sources of support, rather than organizing top-down recruitment drives.*

State provision of youth programmes operates in isolation from more trusted institutions across the private and non-governmental sectors.

**Recommendation:** *Efforts should be directed towards joint working by multiple stakeholders to share information, co-ordinate policy and activities, and evaluate and monitor outcomes.*

Existing policy favours wage labour over entrepreneurial activity.

**Recommendation:** *Research into the informal economy should be used to ground new avenues of support to young people working in this sector that are more appropriate, relevant and emancipatory.*

## Chapter 5

# Youth as the solution, not the problem

### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents an overview of the responses of young people to the diverse realities of life across the region; the opportunities and options followed by them; and the outcomes and implications these have for conflict, security and development.

In general, the youth bulge, vulnerability and exclusion do not cause armed conflict, lawlessness or the breakdown of social cohesion and inter-generational relations. Poverty, socio-economic disempowerment, deficits in local governance, the limited engagement between the state and youth, and youth's limited participation or representation in mainstream decision-making all provide plausible grounds for a view of the youth bulge as dangerously problematic. But the YOVEX study found evidence to the contrary. In a majority of cases, vulnerable and excluded youth demonstrate resilience, ingenuity and civil consciousness, tapping into a range of socio-cultural resources and opportunities, including forming self-help groups, establishing self-starting entrepreneurial initiatives in the informal sector, utilizing CSOs (including religious groups), and creating or inserting themselves into power niches. No country exemplified this resilience more than Guinea, which, despite the continued existence of authoritarian rule, a youth bulge, widespread poverty and conflict-prone neighbouring countries, has experienced neither a major armed conflict, nor civil war, nor the complete breakdown of governance.

The YOVEX study acknowledges the existence of isolated cases of sub-national clashes and unrest in Nigeria (the Niger Delta region) and the northern parts of Ghana, Mali and Niger, but claims that in these instances young people have become key elements in violence

#### Box 5.1: Chapter summary

This chapter describes how the demographic (youth) bulge, vulnerability and exclusion rarely of themselves constitute a cause or source of armed conflict, lawlessness or social breakdown. In a majority of cases, young people are resilient and tap into a repertoire of socio-cultural resources and local opportunities, including forming self-help groups; instituting self-starting entrepreneurial initiatives; taking part in informal economic activity; engaging with CSOs; and pursuing sport, entertainment industry roles and media as sources of income and social and political voice. Young people also recognize and sustain traditional moral sensibilities as defences against lawlessness, brakes on injustice and cushions against the impacts of social upheaval.

In cases where the vulnerability and exclusion of the young became key elements in violence, this is often due to the absence, erosion or obstruction of those viable resources, opportunities and activities (beyond the state) that young people utilize to sustain themselves. These activities and opportunities thus present a viable window of intervention for national and international agencies.

The chapter ends with a summary of specific contexts shown up by the study that enable the eruption of violence where socio-economic factors in themselves were not automatic precursors of violent unrest.



largely in the absence or obstruction of the trends toward positive self-help activities that sustain youth elsewhere. Initiating, protecting, supporting or upscaling such activities represent valuable windows of intervention and opportunities for partnership by national and international governmental and non-governmental agencies and institutions.

## 5.2 What sustains vulnerable and excluded youth?

The YOVEX study found an extensive, but unsung and unrecognized, domain of structures, actors and self-start activities outside of the state, the family and subsistence activities that young people look to for support, advancement and a sense of belonging. Different activities and organizations feature in varying combinations of choices made by youth across the seven case studies. We discuss their major emergent typologies below.

### 5.2.1 Civil society organizations

Across the case studies, the YOVEX study found strong evidence of youthful involvement with CSOs either in the form of self-help groups or as proactive engagements with programmes and projects implemented by NGOs and religious bodies.

The services provided by CSOs include counselling, skills training, support for education, sensitization and awareness campaigns, and health training and screening. In Mali, Niger and Sierra Leone, youth self-help groups and associations set up to advance their common interests are common. In Mali, about 45 per cent of surveyed youth claim to belong to at least one of the 488 registered youth associations in the country. In Niger, about 40 per cent of youth respondents claimed to be members of at least one youth self-help organization. The youth bodies operate at the district, regional and national levels to provide work skills training and awareness programmes covering diseases and health issues (e.g. regarding HIV/AIDS). They also mobilize youth for community development work such as the periodic cleaning up of districts, and in doing so develop leadership skills and fund-raising capabilities. Many autonomous youth-led CSOs apply successfully to major donor agencies and international development agencies for funding for social and humanitarian activities. In Niger, the National Youth Organization for Employment Promotion provides business development training for its members and, through grants from international development agencies, campaigns to dissuade young Nigerien from illegal migration by offering micro-credit finance for business start-ups in Niger. The organization has developed into a major voice of young people in Niger whose members often represent Niger in international events.

In post-war Sierra Leone, young people in the provinces have formed community-based youth groups as sources of support, social control, socialization, and engagement with state and society. In Makeni, Kenema and Kono districts in Sierra Leone, youth groups are actively involved in peer education, self-advocacy, peace education, community development and recreational competitions, especially football leagues. Some of these groups embark on fund-raising and advocacy campaigns to pay school fees or get placements in vocational training centres for their members. In Nigeria's Niger Delta region, young people have formed the

Commonwealth of Niger Delta Youths (and its affiliated Niger Delta Budget Monitoring Group – NDEBUMOG) to reduce youth restiveness through activities such as youth economic empowerment, poverty alleviation, governance, conflict resolution and peace-building, sustainable development, human rights, and environmental justice. Through coalition building, networking and strategic engagement with civil society groups across the board, the organization has facilitated many empowerment programmes for youth in the Niger Delta as a way of reducing their dependence on oil company and government hand-outs. Recently, the organization has engaged with budget monitoring work in Niger Delta states through NDEBUMOG to improve accountability and transparency in financial resource management among groups in the region.

Respondents across the seven case studies identified CSOs or NGOs as the most important sources of support to them. NGOs in particular are quite visible and active in the provision of youth-related services in the post-war societies of Liberia and Sierra Leone and in the upland border areas of Guinea, where respondents counted the American Refugee Council as the most effective and trusted institution known to them – and the police the least.

Religious groups enjoy heightened visibility in the provision of services like counselling, education, skills training, health care and employment. In Nigeria and Ghana, youth have been targeted by, and increasingly dominate the membership of, Pentecostal Christian churches and Islamic movements. These religious bodies and assemblies have become avenues for youth to gain recognition, visibility and the necessary ‘connections’ for upward social mobility. The fact that most political elites and public office holders frequently attend religious programmes mean that religious activities have become avenues for youth to access public office holders.

In Nigeria, the Deeper Life Church and the Redeemed Evangelical Mission run services designed to ‘uplift the physical, material and spiritual plight of youth’. The latter organization operates the Rehoboth Home as a skills acquisition centre where homeless youth are taken into care, fed, taught vocational skills and assisted to start businesses with contributions from the covenant partners of the International Women Prayer Conference. Both organizations also run youth sensitization campaigns designed to curb the involvement of young people in premarital sex, HIV/AIDS, cyber crime and other such activities. The Muslim Student Society also undertakes moral mission-led work through programmes like the Islamic Vacation Course. Active during school vacation periods, this scheme seeks to inculcate moral values and leadership qualities in youth, as well as to promote social interaction among members. It features an annual leadership programme and welfare services such as financial assistance to pay school fees, free tutorial classes for students (irrespective of religion), the provision of accommodation to stranded students, career training and counselling, computer training, etc.

Religious groups have become emergent reservoirs of effective strategies and expertise in mobilizing and sensitizing youth, and meeting their needs and aspirations. The engagement of these and the vast range of other CSOs by national and international agencies represents a critical entry point for policies prioritizing a more thorough-going engagement with a wider range of young Africans.

However, there is little or no acknowledgement of, let alone focus on, the potential for religious and other groups to infringe on the rights of the young people whose needs they cater to. Given that the state often has neither the capacity nor the interest to demand accountability from civil society groups, already vulnerable youth, e.g. girls, can become further excluded by discriminatory practices in different organizations, but accept such practices because they are given food, shelter and skills development, among other things. This issue receives little or no attention in official circles.

### 5.2.2 Sport and entertainment

YOVEX respondents across the region reported an increasing trend toward sports and show business-related activities like acting, drama and singing as leisure pursuits with a developing relationship to income generation. Often customary activities with deep historical roots, these interests have become part of new cultural trends fuelled by the globalizing influences of TV, the Internet and the international sports culture, becoming partly commercialized as career pathways – or at least as patchy centres of industrious effort sustained by the over-subscription of willing entrants. However, respondents often reported their frustration at struggling with an underdeveloped commercial infrastructure above the local level and the difficulty of bringing talent, resources and promotional expertise together.

In Niger, for example, wrestling is a major sporting activity among male youths, not least because of the annual national competition. The yearly national contest involves over 80 young men drawn from the eight regions of the country and brings fame, recognition, and honour to participants and their communities. Champions are also rewarded with monetary prizes, material gifts and symbolic trophies. Less traditionally, football and the membership of football clubs and academies have lately become key preoccupations of young people, mostly males. The popularity of major European football leagues and football clubs (Barcelona and Real Madrid of Spain's La Liga; Arsenal, Manchester United, Chelsea and Liverpool of the English Premiership; and AC Milan, Inter Milan and Juventus of the Italian Calcio) and the desire to emulate prominent African football stars have fuelled three things: firstly, the proliferation of football academies; secondly, the increase in scouting and talent-hunting activities; and thirdly, the resort to football as a means of earning income, a career pathway and an avenue for emigration. Moreover, the popularity of major European football clubs is internationalizing youth identities and inducing a wave of aspirant social mobilization as local branches of these clubs' supporters' clubs spring up.

Local football clubs also serve important social functions. In Ghana, membership of soccer clubs by male youth is widespread in places like Nima and Madina, and national stars such as Stephen Appiah, Micheal Essien and Sule Muntari, and international ones such as Ronaldo, Pelé, Kanu and Samuel Eto serve as role models for local youth. The soccer clubs are self-financing, with members contributing a monthly average of USD 5 in return for benefits such as regular matches. As importantly, soccer clubs often directly support members. For example, when a member is going to marry or becomes injured or bereaved, club members often contribute money to show solidarity. Additionally, soccer clubs enforce strict moral and disciplinary codes (on drugs, criminality, etc.) among members, which are understood as a way of preparing them for the demands of potential football careers in Europe.

### 5.2.3 Media: livelihoods and voice

Large numbers of young Africans of both genders tap into media roles and resources as actors, musicians, MCs, producers and event organizers. While not new, the recent intensification and internationalization (at least in spirit) of their activities, aided by new technology and large diasporas, mark the burgeoning of latent regional youth cultures in a new sense. Activity in emergent cultural industries alongside established centres of video production in Nigeria and music production in Senegal and Mali is enabling young Africans to develop sources of income and new kinds of identity that reflect both local origins and international horizons.

Such activities constitute the major source of youth's voice in relation to the public policy and governance discourses conducted by national media. Songs and films have become organs of youth commentary on socio-economic and political processes and actors. In post-war Sierra Leone, for example, prominent youth musicians have released songs that reflect the disempowerment of youth. Sierra Leone's Khadi Black is a leading young female musician who released the song 'Fire' in the post-war period to decry the wanton violence of her estranged generation and demand employment and social rehabilitation for young people. Similarly, in Nigeria, a male youth singer called Eedris released the song 'Jaga-Jaga' ('broken down') to reflect the poor state of governance and governmental insensitivity to the population in post-military Nigeria.

Interestingly too, popular young artistes are increasingly incorporated into government through appointments as special advisers/assistants and representatives of state/regional governors on different aspects of governance. Accordingly, media roles and resources are also being transformed as tools to increase inclusion in and exercise influence on public policy, as both self-start activities and established mass media come to feature the voice of the young.

Digital video and sound-recording technology, the Internet, and mobile communications are enabling youth media to leapfrog some of the deficiencies of national communications and energy infrastructure and establish communicative networks, as well as to produce comparatively cheap media products and home-grown publications. Obstacles to development often occur above the local level, however. Cultural industries have been left out of national economic development plans and so commercial infrastructures, distribution networks and export avenues are undeveloped. Respondents in Guinea – once home to the largest (nationalized) music industry in the region – were highly articulate in describing the industry's shortfalls in marketing, promotion and distribution that currently prevent home-grown products from reaching international markets.

### 5.2.4 Informal economic activities

The involvement of young people in informal economic activities is widespread and shows up clearly as the commonest coping strategy of youth across the seven case studies. Youth are key actors in petty trading, subsistence agriculture, cross-border commerce, commercial transportation and motorcycle transport (taxi-motto or *okada*), barbering and hairdressing, shoemaking and repairs, car repairs, car washing, call centres, mobile phone dealing and

battery charging, music and media production copying and retailing, etc. Such activity is, however, generally unenumerated and unacknowledged, and therefore invisible and/or misunderstood at the national and international levels; this despite its clearly visible everyday role in enabling survival and – because of the social genesis of many of these activities – sustaining social cohesion.

Overall, informal economic activities are the epicentre of youth entrepreneurial development, not least because of the low entry/start-up costs; the absence or avoidability of governmental red tape and regulation, and correspondingly low administration costs; the ease of skills acquisition in on-the-job contexts; the extensive use of social networks (peer, family, kinship, etc.); and youth's perception of such activities as a means to emancipation, i.e. a route to adulthood and the chance to do things for themselves.

Different activities attract different categories of youth, with more female youth involved in petty trading, cross-border commerce, hairdressing and dressmaking; while males are involved in taxi-motto/*okada* transportation, cross-border trade (often smuggling), repairing cars, shoemending and barbering. Rural youth are mostly involved in subsistence agriculture, taxi-motto transport and cross-border trade, with urban youth associated more with running call centres, *okada* transportation, car washing, etc. In the post-war societies of Liberia and Sierra Leone, and in Mali in particular, the YOVEX study recorded huge youth involvement in petty and cross-border trade. The articles traded include locally made tie-dye fabrics, hides and skins, palm oil and other agricultural products; and imported goods, such as fabrics, household electronics and auto parts.

The range of informal economic activities that youth are involved in include the legal, the illegal and those falling within grey areas of law, e.g. Internet fraud (called 'yahoo-yahoo'); the smuggling of goods, including motorcars and motorcycles; and trade in contraband occur in many locales.

In Nigeria and Ghana, cross-border trade involves the smuggling of items either banned or subject to official duties, most especially motorcycles and cars. In Bawku (Ghana), a border town, male youth, especially in the farming off-season, are actively involved in smuggling motorcycles to Wa (a town in north-west Ghana about 300 km away) at an average profit of USD 12 per trip. In Nigeria, several thousand male and female young people criss-cross the Nigerian–Beninese border on a daily basis, with some involved in legitimate trade (in household items) and others in vehicle smuggling.

In this context, officialdom is widely seen as hugely oppressive and problematic. According to youth traders involved in legitimate commerce, and as corroborated by the YOVEX study visit to Seme on the Nigerian–Beninese border, traders experience multiple illegal taxation and extortion, harassment and arrests, and other barriers to trade on both sides of the border. This is in spite of ECOWAS protocols on the free trade in and movement of goods and services. In certain instances, some of the traders are either unaware of their rights and obligations, or the retinue of immigration, custom and security agencies are poorly trained. In spite of the barriers, the major attractions for the youth involved include low start-up costs and profitability, especially in trade across national frontiers.

In countries like Mali, Guinea, Ghana and Niger, informal economic activities, especially taxi-motto transport (see below), cross-border commerce/smuggling and rural-urban migration, are particularly attractive to male youth in the farming off-season (which lasts for up to six months) when farm work is not available. Such activities become part of urbanization trends where rural subsistence practices structured around traditional land rights are forced to change as attitudes to land change and hitherto common lands become subject to commercial value and dispute.

Certain strands of activity have become viable and accepted aspects of the economy to compensate for difficulties within the formal sector. In Mali, Ghana and Guinea, for example, transportation by taxi-motto has emerged as a key component of local and national economies because of bad or unpaved roads, the higher cost of car transportation, and the reach (deep into neighbourhoods and villages) of *okadas*, as well as the self-supply of cheap, flexible labour. Taxi-mottos have become the most popular way of transporting produce to markets, commuting to farmlands, navigating and avoiding traffic jams in cities, and gaining access to inner cities and neighbourhoods.

Young people, mostly male, are widely involved in owning and operating the taxi-motto business because of its distinctive features and advantages, i.e. low entry/start-up and maintenance costs, ease of operation, widespread demand, and high profitability.

The YOVEX study also found evidence that the *okada* business involves both educated and uneducated young people. For some, including artisans and those employed in the formal sector, taxi-motto work represents a 'second job', undertaken either after the close of work or when the availability of work in core occupations is low. Students also participate as a means of meeting fees and training costs.

Young taxi-motto operators across the case studies talked of confronting operational difficulties often arbitrarily created by the state or its agents, especially police officers, i.e. demands for bribes, harassment and the seizure of motorcycles, multiple taxation by government officials, and fuel scarcity. However, the business is still considered worthwhile and rewarding, enabling its operators to meet critical feeding and housing needs.

The popularity and profitability of the taxi-motto business appear to be a valuable window of intervention for entrepreneurial development for national and international development agencies, either to remove some of operational difficulties currently experienced by those involved or to strengthen and standardize its operation (through enhanced health and safety practices and greater access to bank credit).

In other cases, the YOVEX study found evidence of young people without any technical training or apprenticeship undertaking highly skilled activities. In Guinea, for instance, one teenage boy operates a local community radio station in his community after assembling different scrap components to make his own radio. His income comes from charging for making public announcements and advertising the sale of goods on market days. In another instance, a young man operates a mini-computer education school for people in his community, after having assembled and built computers by himself through information obtained on the Internet. This is similar to several cases of female youth in the seven case studies who are involved in hair-plaiting and self-start hairdressing salons without any training or apprenticeship.



Less positively, the YOVEX study also found evidence of youth deploying their talents and innovations in illegal activities such as Internet fraud in Nigeria (popularly called ‘yahoo-yahoo’). A majority of yahoo-yahoo youth surveyed were found to aged 17–30 years, and were often unable to continue their education because of limited admission places in higher education institutions in the country.

### 5.2.5 Ideals and beliefs

Across the case studies, the YOVEX study also found evidence of strong pre-existing social constructs and practices aligned to resilience, perseverance, patriotism and creativity being carried forward by youth themselves into new socially minded entrepreneurial activities and hybrid youth identities. These culturally embedded ideals were acknowledged as moderating youth attitudes toward their socio-economic and political difficulties, especially in deflecting violent protest and anger away from state authorities and other groups, alerting young people to the possibility of social decline into lawlessness, and highlighting the role of activities with positive social and personal outcomes.

To a large extent, the traditional perception of youth is still understood to demand tolerance and forbearance on the part of young people, and these aspects of youth-hood remain valued across societies not yet wholly fragmented on modern lines. There is still the view that, in a perfect world, youth-hood offers the best route to social and personal maturity. Additionally, particularly in Guinea, there is a strong sense of nationalism and loyalty to the state (a legacy of Sékou Touré’s socialist regime), as well as an overriding social commitment to a parochial Islamic morality, with many people perceiving attendance at a religious school as a mark of eligibility for marriage. The extent to which young Africans showed themselves to be conscious of this kind of heritage and keen to preserve it in combination with new positive cultural trends rather than merely seeking to escape the old ways for the new – even when traditional youth-hood can no longer supply sufficient routes to adulthood – was striking.

In other cases, the advent of new religious movements and principles of non-violence, divine powers and intervention, and destiny have magnified some of these cultural traits. In Mali for example, the Mandé notions of Kamalinw and Kamalinya (meaning youth or young men specifically) are celebrated as an important form of social security for the elderly. Here, youth-hood is thought to entail working hard, perseverance and providing support to the elderly in the family and community. Closely linked to this is the cultural notion of ‘*mugnu ni sabali*’ (patience and abnegation) as cardinal values for all people, and young people in particular.

The essentially relationship-based nature of societies across the region is crucial to understanding patterns of inclusion and exclusion, and young people were very aware of this – and of its positive and negative aspects. In Mali, the latter-day notion of the so-called ‘*système D*’ exemplifies this awareness. The ‘D’ stands for *débrouillardise*, a French word that can be translated as managing to somehow cope successfully with adversity and come out on top by enduring difficult circumstances through resourcefulness and goodwill. It entails reliance on a vast, ever-changing network of contacts and activities located in the informal sector.



There were many acknowledgements that *système D* includes cutting corners and engaging in activities of questionable morality by Malian society's standards, such as being the facilitator and middle man of schemes to defraud the government, prostitution or influence peddling.

In other instances, youth turn to 'Komo' and other mystical and spiritual rituals and practices (by consulting fortune tellers or participating in esoteric or mystic rituals) as sources of strength in their efforts to meet the challenges of unemployment and an uncertain future. These principles appear to inform Malian youth's view of their country as poor, with severe limitations on the opportunities that the state provides or can provide, and the necessity to develop imaginative and practical strategies in dealing with their predicament.

Paradoxically, but not unusually or unexpectedly, given the national 'bias towards hope', about 65 per cent of youth respondents (evenly spread between males and females) in Mali were quite optimistic about the future.

### 5.2.6 Political activism

Across the case studies, there is evidence of youthful political activism. Young people are involved in spontaneous, short-term political demonstrations and riots to press for specific demands without seeking political power (like in Guinea). Elsewhere, youth are involved in political activism within recognizable structures like acting as 'boys', stalwarts or enforcers of political parties (area boys and girls in Nigeria); or party thugs or youth wings (Ghana); or as members of student unions (Nigeria) or the broader civil rights/society movements (Sierra Leone, Liberia and Mali). In the context of structural rules limiting the participation of youth in decision-making assemblies, this has emerged as an avenue for youth to access public office holders and/or influence public policy.

## 5.3 Explaining isolated cases of violence as a response to youth vulnerability and exclusion

The outbreaks of violence and insurrection in places like northern Mali, Niger, Nigeria, and Ghana and in the Niger Delta suggest the possibility of violent manifestations of youth vulnerability and exclusion. However, the YOVEX study found that in these specific cases, the following conditions (rather than youth vulnerability and exclusion per se) best explain violent outcomes:

1. The critical structures and opportunities (highlighted above) that sustain young people in many ways – including the downside effects of development initiatives – are absent, distorted or obstructed.
2. Pre-existing horizontal inequalities, often constructed according to ethnic, religious and regional (as opposed to inter-generational) identities – e.g. the conflicts in the Niger Delta (Nigeria) and the Taureg problem in Mali and Niger – are strongly rooted in perceived and real regional imbalances, environmental neglect and the unfair allocation of resources.

3. Deliberate attempts at the manipulation of existing conditions by political elites in the contest for political power use youth as a means to this end; e.g. in Sierra Leone's 2007 election period, many youth involved in political violence were mobilized by political parties to influence electoral outcomes.
4. Participation in violence is perceived as a form of status symbol or acknowledged as a form of achievement or reflecting a continuing historical pattern as a service to the community (i.e. defending the community). In northern Ghana (Bawku), for example, it was discovered that some youth became involved in inter-group clashes to enhance their status in their immediate communities.
5. Natural resources are exploited, involving the presence of or connections to international production networks; e.g. in northern Mali and Niger and the Niger Delta region of Nigeria, the poor environmental practices and questionable corporate strategies of multinational mining and oil exploration firms have emerged as key issues in youth violence.
6. Reliable, authoritative dispute arbitration procedures are absent. In rural Ghana, for example, neither traditional chieftaincy nor state justice is readily available to resolve land disputes, as growing commercial pressures force changes in the subtle balances of land exploitation interests.
7. The inability of states to control valuable resources – such as alluvial diamonds in Sierra Leone – gives rise to illicit power elites and violent conflicts to which youth are recruited.

## 5.4 Conclusions and recommendations

The YOVEX study found ample evidence of resilience and creativity among youth in West Africa.

**Recommendation:** *State institutions, international agencies and the private sector would do well to tap into this creativity, not only to increase the impact of existing relevant youth-focused initiatives, but also to leverage this for overall development efforts.*

**Recommendation:** *State–civil society partnerships should be encouraged as a channel for aligning policy and generating a multiplier effect for youth-focused initiatives.*

CSOs, although extremely relevant in dealing with the challenges confronting youth, are not always benevolent actors. They can, even if inadvertently, infringe on the rights of the very people they claim to be assisting.

**Recommendation:** *Civil society should be internally accountable and avoid discriminating further against the already vulnerable youth whom they cater to.*

## Chapter 6

# What needs to be done?

### 6.1 Key propositions resulting from the YOVEX study

Mid-way through the YOVEX study, those responsible for undertaking it advanced the six key propositions outlined in chapter 1. It is now possible, based on the full findings of the study, to reflect on these propositions in more detail.

**Proposition 1:** *Youth in West Africa should be defined by local realities, as opposed to international standards.*

The research found that the UN-derived notion of youth (especially its anchoring in the age bracket 15–24 years) is exclusionary. While age is an easily verifiable criterion for defining youth, it is not sufficient as the sole determinant, because it does not take into account the marginal socio-economic circumstances in which West Africans struggle to survive. Youthhood in the region is defined by a composite of factors including age, marriage, and social roles and responsibilities, and each or a combination of these factors resonate in varying degrees among categories of youth (male and female, urban and rural, educated and uneducated, etc.).

**Proposition 2:** *Youth exclusion and vulnerability are functions of a country's context and governance.*

The YOVEX study found that the nature of the enabling governance environment at any point in time is a strong predictor of the extent of youth exclusion and vulnerability in the countries of West Africa. Where the socio-economic disempowerment of youth is linked to the level of economic endowment and underdevelopment, governance structures embody potentials to either moderate or aggravate youth exclusion and vulnerability.

**Proposition 3:** *Current state-led youth programmes are supply driven, unresponsive and short lived, and do not target, leverage or upscale the successful and durable initiatives of the private and voluntary sectors.*

The research found that a majority of government-led initiatives on youth are largely non-functional, non-participatory, short lived or driven by the calculation of immediate political gains. Where they appear to reflect the needs and aspirations of youth (e.g. unemployment), they become easily politicized or desperately inadequate (relative to the scale of the problem at hand), and tend to have minimal impact on youth. Conversely, many initiatives undertaken by non-governmental actors and institutions, especially religious groups and youth associations, appear more responsive and effective in meeting the needs and aspirations of young people. The programme conception is less politicized, more participatory, and grounded

in local practices and priorities, and the programmes operate in a more transparent manner. Overall, private and voluntary sector ‘youth’ initiatives show promise in terms of their resilience and replicability.

**Proposition 4:** *Youth exclusion and vulnerability do not lead to violent outcomes where mediating institutions channel youth energies into collaborative and productive activities.*

We found that only in relatively few cases do youth vulnerability and exclusion lead to extensive violent outcomes. Even in such cases, violence is often a means (as opposed to an end) by which youth seek to tap into the instrumentality of violence to create or defend socio-economic and political privileges, and insert themselves into power structures controlled by political elites. The scope, reach and depth of informal structures and institutions in providing and delivering services to young people are immense. The range of services delivered include education, financial and medical assistance, acting as providers and finders of employment, and creating parallel structures for reintegrating or reconnecting with the formal structures of the state. Also, the emphasis of some of these structures, together with pre-existing cultural constructs on non-violence and resilience, dampens the prospect of violent outcomes from exclusion and vulnerability. Generally, informal structures, institutions and processes can help mediate the interface between youth exclusion and social outcomes and mitigate destabilizing pressures.

**Proposition 5:** *A wide range of opportunities exist for unleashing the agency and creativity of African youth in coping with their exclusion and vulnerability (sports/music, religion/faith, armed groups and informal economic activities).*

The research found considerable evidence of the creativity and resilience of youth in coping with exclusion and vulnerability. Some involved legitimate/legal initiatives (commerce, informal economic activities and self-advocacy), while others are illegal or border on grey areas of the law (Internet fraud, cross-border smuggling, etc.). This creativity and resilience are underlined by young people’s search for and creation of opportunities and resources by youth to meet needs and aspirations like education, employment and subsistence living; catering for parents and extended families; and positioning themselves for setting up independent household in the future. The testimonies of young people provide anecdotal evidence for their increasing abandonment of or lack of faith in state-led initiatives; with such attitudes having been built up over the past twenty years. Coping mechanisms are frequently rooted in activities outside the realm of the state that generally facilitate social inclusion and enhance youth participation in productive activities.

**Proposition 6:** *More than national conditions, the local enabling environment determines whether the scattered energies of Africa’s youth are channelled towards peaceful or violent pursuits.*

As a result of propositions 3, 4, and 5, the research suggests that the conditions of and differences between societies where youth exclusion and vulnerability lead to violent and non-violent outcomes relate more to local dynamics. Such dynamics include the capacity, scope

and social space for invention and creativity; the connections between informal structures and state/formal institutions and actors; and the depth of services and activities of non-governmental institutions.

## 6.2 Recommendations

In the light of its findings, the YOVEX study makes the following recommendations:

### To national governments:

- Revise or prepare national youth policies that set out reciprocal obligations of the state and youth, renew commitments, and provide viable platforms for collaboration and broad stakeholding between state and non-state institutions in youth development.
- Engage non-state actors – NGOs, religious groups and youth associations – in the design and delivery of youth services.
- Ensure that various state institutions demonstrate greater commitment to the implementation of a new or revised national youth policy through the creation of time-bound targets (in the form of **youth development goals**) and resource allocation.
- Adopt measures, mechanisms and benchmarks to track and monitor the extent to which youth interests are integrated into the priorities, policies and programmes of the key government ministries, departments and agencies that execute national youth policies.
- Create national platforms to recognize and support the development of organic youth leadership and active youth participation in the civic life of their communities and national politics as forums for the articulation, co-ordination, and organization of different youth voices and interests across the country.
- Set up **national youth development funds** with contributions from state and non-state institutions (religious bodies, NGOs, youth groups, etc.).
- Remove structural impediments that restrict the participation and representation of youth in formal politics, especially decision-making processes (parliament, the cabinet, etc.).

### To voluntary sector groups (including youth associations):

- Increase co-operation and co-ordination among existing voluntary sector organizations involved in youth services.
- Develop the capacity to access, influence and monitor public office holders and government institutions in order to ensure their sustained attention, transparency and action regarding national youth development agendas.
- Ensure that the programmes developed and implemented by national and international NGOs are relevant, effective and beneficial to youth, and tap into local capacity.
- Leverage the skills and resources of national NGOs' members and partner organizations into long-term, self-sustaining programmes, and develop their capacity to define independent agendas rather than just seeking to implement the agendas of governments and international development agencies.

- Increase internal democracy, accountability and transparency in the raising and use of funds and in the treatment of all youth, particularly marginalized youth.
- Establish or upscale existing sub-regional coalitions and interactions to share ideas and resources, forge common objectives, and co-ordinate strategies for seeking sub-regional approaches and interventions in order to augment national-level initiatives on youth development.

#### **To the private sector:**

- Increase support for state and non-state youth initiatives through greater financial intervention and policy alignment.
- Integrate youth development into corporate social responsibility strategies.
- Deepen and extend youth development initiatives beyond educated and urban youth.
- Develop youth-specific products and services.
- Partner with state and youth groups to develop more efficient strategies for bringing youth informal sector activities into official purview.

#### **To ECOWAS:**

- Refine and align the ECOWAS Youth Policy and the ECPF to reflect the priority concerns of youth across the region.
- Facilitate legislation-led initiatives that reflect the priority concerns of youth in member states.
- Provide a platform for interaction between state-led and non-state processes aimed at regionwide youth empowerment.
- Partner with governments and youth associations to develop youth programmes and initiatives across national boundaries.
- Support a **regional voice of youth conference** or **festival** designed to build the capacity and connectivity of youth groups in specific areas of activity and to acknowledge and celebrate the creativity, innovation and resilience of young people.

#### **To DFID and other international development agencies:**

- Use a nuanced and flexible definition of youth, as opposed to the current use of the UN's 15–24 years criterion.
- Design programmes that selectively target priority youth issues and cohorts based on the case-by-case identification of promising initiatives ripe for upscaling.
- Encourage the design or updating of **national youth policies**, the creation of **national youth development funds** and the setting up of independent **national youth commissions** as vehicles for co-ordinated strategies for youth empowerment that leverage non-state actors rather than substitute for them.
- Provide targeted assistance to selected youth groups and associations so as to build their capacity for broad-based youth empowerment geared to the articulation and advocacy

of youth interests through service delivery, lobbying and engagement with many different channels of influence.

- Support youth-focused research and data collection to improve policy formulation, planning, implementation and evaluation at the national, regional and international levels.
- Partner with regional bodies, especially ECOWAS, to develop youth programmes and initiatives across national boundaries.



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